AN IN-DEPTH LOOK AT SCOTT JOPLIN'S *TREEMONISHA*

by

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Introduction

The aim of this document is to give an in-depth look at Scott Joplin's opera *Treemonisha* with an analysis of the music and characters of the opera. By creating this document, I hope to give music lovers and scholars a guide to a clearer understanding of the important political and social messages found throughout *Treemonisha*. I will also provide details about the preparation for the premier of this work and the complications encountered while attempting to stage *Treemonisha* nearly 60 years after its composition.

For the many classes I registered for in my academic learning career, *Treemonisha* was only on the syllabus for a course I took during the last semester of my doctoral coursework. By that time, I had gone through my bachelor's degree requirements for music history, my master's degree requirements while also taking the course Operatic Literature, and my musicology minor in my doctorate before discussing Joplin's *Treemonisha*. It was my pleasure to program Remus's aria "Wrong is Never Right" on my 2nd master's recital, and just as I had predicted, most of my colleagues were unaware that Scott Joplin ever wrote an opera and did not know the opera existed. One of my colleagues asked me why no one ever talks about this opera. This was the moment that made me realize this opera is discussed far too little and deserves much further research.

Treemonisha is, without question, one of the greatest operas of American, and more specifically, African American culture composed by the knowledgeable, learned, and masterfully gifted African American composer Scott Joplin. This is an opera that is often overlooked and ultimately not discussed or taught in many academic settings when speaking about the greats of

operatic literature, but this is due in part to the work being considered obscure because it was composed by Scott Joplin in the first decade of the 1900s, but was not performed until the 1970s. The purpose of my study is to shed light on this esoteric opera so that scholars and musicians may have a better understanding of its inner workings in hopes that this beautiful work might potentially become a part of the frequently performed opera canon along with other great operas such as Bizet's *Carmen*, Puccini's *La Bohème*, and Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* which are performed all over the world today.

There seems to be a lack of understanding on how to approach this opera from an analytical standpoint, so it is my aim to provide a better understanding of the musical complexities Joplin creates when he combines the European and African aesthetics in the music of this opera. Some European opera conventions found throughout this work include arias, chorus, and recitative, while musical aesthetics most often associated with African culture like call and response, improvisation, and heavy syncopation are also heard throughout. Along with a musical analysis, I will provide an in-depth investigation of the different characters of the story so audiences may enjoy it more, having a clear understanding of the intentions in his specific choices for each of the characters in the story.

There is sometimes a discrepancy about where this opera first premiered and who was the first to appropriately orchestrate Joplin's piano score for an orchestral production. Some believe the orchestration arranged by T.J. Anderson for the Atlanta premiere in 1972 was copied, and

Gunther Schuller made a few slight changes to that score for the 1975 Houston Grand Opera production of *Treemonisha*. My studies should give clarity to any ambiguity concerning the original orchestration and premiere performance of Joplin's *Treemonisha*. I will be using two different orchestral scores, one arranged by T.J. Anderson and the other arranged for the Houston Grand Opera production, in order to compare the two to find differences and similarities concerning the use of certain instruments and the particular moods created by these instrumental sounds in each orchestral version. There will be an interview provided from the original cast as a source for understanding the difficult process of staging the opera for the first time.

This document will provide insight into and an explanation of Scott Joplin's early musical teachings and how Joplin understood the theory of music via the teachings of his teachers and mentors. I will describe Joplin's unique musical aesthetic of combining European and African music to create his own unique style. This section will explain Scott Joplin's Ragtime style specifically, so I will discuss specific songs like *Maple Leaf Rag* and *The Entertainer* so that we may have a better understanding of specific sounds and expressions to listen for in his later composed opera *Treemonisha.* The first chapter of this document will serve as a musical overview of Joplin's musical style so that musicians from other musical genres and different backgrounds may be able to share a similar understanding. I will examine the music and story of other operas composed by Scott Joplin and the similarities and differences those

works might have to *Treemonisha*. Also, in this section I will give an overview of the plot of *Treemonisha* and the relation of the characters to one another.

The next chapter will give a very detailed analysis of each of the characters in the story and a justification of why Joplin gives each of the characters their specific duty in the opera for the development of the plot. This chapter speaks about the character Treemonisha and how she differs from other female characters we see in the genre of opera during and prior to the composition of *Treemonisha*. There will also be an explanation of which voice types and fachs would sing each of the different roles. There will include an analysis of the musical themes Joplin uses to create certain moods and convey ideas for the plot of the story. In this section, I will show very specific examples of how *Treemonisha* uses both American folk traditions and European musical aesthetics that were typical for most operas. This is the section where I will discuss both Anderson's and Schuller's respective orchestrations and what they envisioned when creating their specific orchestral score.

There will be a discussion about the authenticity of *Treemonisha* as a traditional opera composed in the European style, and also as a "Ragtime opera," as it is so often inaccurately called. *Treemonisha* has the conundrum of being thought of as too black for the white Americans and too white to be truly and solely for the African American culture. Some African Americans felt that Joplin became a sellout because he chose to compose in this white dominated genre of opera, and European Americans felt Joplin's portrayal of some of the characters in this

opera did not accurately represent the African Americans of that particular time period. We will uncover how this opera, with its all-African American cast, differs from other more popular all black operas like *Porgy and Bess*, as far as the authenticity of black culture and black American music is concerned.

The following chapter will include information on the premiere of *Treemonisha* in Atlanta, Georgia sponsored by Morehouse College. There will be information about how this premiere performance was received by the public with a look at some of the reviews. Along with a look at the premiere in Atlanta, there will be a look at the Houston Grand Opera performance of *Treemonisha* a few years after its Atlanta premiere and what differed between these two productions. Even though there have been several productions of *Treemonisha* since the Atlanta premiere, I will only focus on these two productions specifically, being that the Atlanta production was the premiere and the Houston Grand Opera production was the first one produced by a major opera company.

One of the first steps I took to conduct my research on *Treemonisha* was to become as familiar as possible with the opera. It is important for me to have a complete understanding of what is taking place in the score both musically and dramatically. To gain the musical understanding, I spent much time listening to *Treemonisha* both with the score and without searching and listening for themes and motives. I listened for the various musical moods that may surround each of the characters. For example, if I am studying the music surrounding the

character Remus, I would pay close attention to factors that could depict particular moods such as the musical instruments that are most often associated with his character, whether it be brass, woodwinds, etc., and which mode, either major or minor, is most frequently heard when we see or hear from him. Understanding the music can also help my understanding of the plot and drama of the story. To gain an even deeper understanding of the plot, I studied the entire libretto and also watched different stage productions of *Treemonisha*.

Next, I read and studied secondary sources to gain more knowledge about the style of Scott Joplin's music in general and the unique operatic and ragtime characteristics found in the music of this opera. I have compared my personal findings about the work with those found in the readings of some of my secondary sources. While researching and studying the opera, I was fortunate enough to do an interview with Dr. T.J. Anderson, who was the original orchestrator of Joplin's *Treemonisha*. He was able to give much insight about how he became involved with this historical project. Other original cast members have shared with me some light-hearted stories of the rehearsal process for the premiere of this work in Atlanta, Georgia.

Once I gathered all the information I needed from my primary and secondary sources, I used my own thoughts and discoveries to lead the conversation about the authenticity of *Treemonisha* and the political and social importance it served during the time of its composition and still serves in modern day society. My conclusion will include ideas on the role of women; how they are viewed in our culture today by both men and women, and how that view has both

improved and remained the same. This will lead into the concluding statement about the political importance of *Treemonisha* overall and why this opera should be performed in opera companies and studied in academia more often.

Chapter I: Scott Joplin's Early Life and Education

Scott Joplin (1868-1917) is appropriately lauded as one of the most talented African American pianists and composers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He was raised in a musical household, and although Joplin is most known for his famous Ragtime compositions such as *Maple Leaf Rag* and *The Entertainer*, his broad understanding and gift for music allowed him to also compose in other genres like art song, the piano concerto, and opera. His love and passion for music was discovered at an early age.

Joplin was born in Linden, Texas on Tuesday November 24, 1868, not very long after the end of the American Civil War and the implementation of the Emancipation Proclamation, to Jiles Joplin and Florence Givens Joplin. Scott Joplin's father Jiles was born into slavery in North Carolina, but was freed from slavery while living in Texas several years before the Emancipation Proclamation was enforced in Texas.[1] Scott Joplin's mother Florence was born free from slavery in Kentucky, but like all African Americans of the time, was still viewed as inferior to whites and experienced much bigotry from white Americans. At a young age, Florence moved west to Texas from Kentucky with her father and grandmother in search of work and a place with somewhat less bigotry.[2] Jiles and Florence met in Texas where they married as teenagers and, not long after their marriage, they welcomed their first child, the oldest brother of Scott Joplin, Monroe Joplin. Both Jiles and Florence worked as laborers for long hour days with very little compensation in order to provide for their growing family.[3] Times were difficult for the Joplin family, as they were for most African Americans at the time, but Jiles and Florence were

[1] James Haskins and Kathleen Benson, *Scott Joplin* (New York: Stein and Day, 1980), 26.

[2] Ibid., 27.

[3] Ibid., 31.

strong-willed individuals who were determined to provide their loved ones with the best life they could possibly afford.

In 1868, the year Scott Joplin was born, the racial tensions in Texas became quite severe and deadly. In the first 8 months of 1868, there were over 379 killings of African American freedmen and women in Texas because of the backlash to the implementation of a new constitution that allowed more rights to newly freed slaves.[4] The Constitution of 1869 was in compliance with the Congressional Reconstruction Act of 1867, which was the framework for reconstruction for states that were being readmitted into the United States' Union, like Texas which had seceded from the Union in 1861. James Haskins explains the premise of the Constitution of 1869 by stating, "The 1868 constitutional convention had drawn up a new document, the Constitution of 1869, that granted more rights to Negroes, notably suffrage and an equal share in the distribution of money appropriated for public schools."[5]

There was a new emphasis on public education created by the new constitution that was intended to provide a decent education for both newly freed African Americans and white Americans, but there was much opposition from white Americans in Texas. The schools which were built to educate African American children were attacked often by white extremists. The schools would be burned down and the teachers in the schools would be beaten and even sometimes killed because it was considered absolutely deplorable for whites to have black pupils.[6] During slavery, it was also illegal for whites to teach blacks how to read or white and even though slavery had just ended, many freed African Americans felt as though they were in

[4] Haskins and Benson, 33.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid., 34.

semislavery. Semislavery can be defined as, "[A life] that differed little from slavery times except that it was in some ways less secure."[7] The feeling of semislavery was felt the most by freed slaves once Texas had been admitted into the Union in 1870 for the second time and the federal government had removed itself from the state.[8] African Americans all across the country were experiencing oppression by not receiving decent jobs or a decent education, and this led to some African Americans feeling as though they had more stability of a home, job, and meals when being enslaved.

Racial tensions were so harsh in Linden, Texas that the Joplins needed to find a more positive living environment in which to raise their children, so Jiles Joplin found work north of Linden in Texarkana, Texas for a railroad company. In 1873, the Joplin family had grown by two more, with the birth of Scott Joplin's younger brother Robert and his youngest sibling Osie, and all six of them moved to Texarkana, Texas that year.[9] Texarkana was a city with more African Americans who were thriving a bit more than the Joplins had experienced in the past living in Linden.

Texarkana was a large city that provided excitement and opportunities in music, and Scott Joplin was able to thrive as a young child in that type of environment. Texarkana is where Scott Joplin was first exposed to music through means of his family and his local church. Scott Joplin's father Jiles had played the violin for years and when he was a slave, he would accompany the slaves on the plantation as they sang slave songs.[10] Scott Joplin's mother

[7] Haskins and Benson, 35.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid., 41.
[10] Ibid., 49.

Florence was a singer and played the banjo.[11] Scott Joplin became rather proficient at his mother's banjo at the early age of 7 years old. Jiles and Florence encouraged music making in the household.

African Americans believe in the power and profundity of music. Even back in the days of slavery, music was used as a way to lift spirits, send secret messages, and to allow the time to pass. In African American culture of the 19th and early 20th centuries, music was viewed as, "the safest and most profound medium for expression of their feelings."[12] All four of the Joplin children were musically gifted and these musical talents were enhanced and appreciated in their community and in their church, the Mt. Zion Baptist Church in Texarkana.

Mt. Zion Baptist Church was a predominately African American church that acted as the anchor for the community in Texarkana. Like most black churches of the late 19th century, Mt. Zion allowed for freedom in expressiveness for its members in the way they worshiped God. Mt. Zion is where Scott Joplin was first introduced to the sacred music of African Americans. Scott Joplin heard and enjoyed the unrestrained singing and rejoicing provided by members of the choirs in the choir loft, and the responsive nature of the congregation sitting in the pews.[13] The typical black church in America at the time of Scott Joplin's upbringing could be low on resources for instruments like a piano or percussion, so the members of the church would use their bodies to act as percussion with polyrhythms in their hands and stomping to keep tempo in their feet. The congregation of the typical black church would listen attentively to the words of the preacher while he was giving his sermon, but it was expected and encouraged that the

[11] Ibid.
[12] Haskins and Benson, 47.
[13] Ibid., 51.

members in the congregation respond and react to his words during the sermon. The preacher could call out to the congregation during the sermon and the congregation would respond with an enthusiastic "Amen!" or "Hallelujah!" These were some of the sounds often heard by Scott Joplin at Mt. Zion where he grew up.[14] This church is partly responsible for Scott Joplin's first understanding of tonality, polyrhythms, call and response, and syncopation before he had any of his formal musical training. For most African Americans, the black church acts as the first institution of informal teachings. Scott Joplin was not only taught about music in his church, but he was also taught about traditions and practices of African Americans and what they viewed most important through the leadership of the church.[15]

The members of the black church during this time were limited in their education because of the educational disparities African Americans faced, and the doctrine of the church tended to lean toward a combination of sound religion and superstition.[16] The African American community has been riddled with superstition for at least the last 200 years and some of the teachings of superstition found its way into the churches by way of teachings from uneducated preachers and ministers. The ministers and preachers of the gospel in the black churches were more than likely unaware of the contamination on the black community caused by the heavy use of superstition in religious practices. Since the church was the foundation of the black community, the superstitious practices of the church found their way into the community outside of sacred religious practices. Superstition became viewed by whites and educated African Americans as a practice only entertained by those who are uneducated and uninformed, so it was imperative to some African Americans to distance themselves from the practices of superstition

[14] Haskins and Benson, 51.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid.

that were encouraged by the church.[17] The more education an African American obtained, the more he or she would be respected by whites and blacks in the community. It was the aim of Scott Joplin to be as learned as possible and provide a different perspective on what it meant to be an African American living in Texarkana. Scott Joplin clearly strived to be an example of how African Americans in Texarkana could be capable of obtaining a decent education and did not have to fall prey to the teachings and the negative connotations of superstition, which in turn could cause African Americans to be considered less than in the eyes of whites and educated freed African Americans.

Along with the informal musical training provided to him by his membership at Mt. Zion Baptist Church, Scott Joplin was afforded formal piano lessons and European stylistic training from members of the community in Texarkana at a young age. One of Scott Joplin's first music mentors was Mag Washington.[18] Ms. Washington was a black woman who lived in Texarkana who taught music at one of the local schools. She noticed Scott Joplin's gift for music and decided to give him his first lessons in music theory with little to no payment required. She expressed to Scott Joplin the importance of having the fundamental understandings of music theory to complement the natural God-given talents Scott Joplin enjoyed. Another musical mentor was a man by the name of J.C. Johnson. Mr. Johnson was considered a Renaissance Man as he was a musician and a barber, along with many other occupations. Mr. Johnson was of German and Mexican descent.[19] J.C. Johnson gave Joplin piano lessons and taught him how to read piano music at an early age. This began the start of Joplin's piano proficiency. Johnson did not charge Scott Joplin for lessons. Joplin had a deep understanding of the African American

[17] Ibid., 52.
[18] Haskins and Benson, 53.
[19] Ibid.

folk sounds he acquired from his family and the community of Texarkana, but he began to have the same grasp of understanding with the European classical aesthetic when he met music theory teacher Julius Weiss. Weiss took Scott Joplin further in European musical knowledge than the teachings of Mag Washington. Julius Weiss, a German immigrant who lived in Texarkana, decided to take Scott Joplin on as his pupil free of charge.[20] Weiss sharpened Scott Joplin's knowledge of theory and introduced him to composers such as Bach and Mozart. Playing Bach inventions helped Joplin establish a solid piano technique.

Joplin enjoyed the European aesthetic so much that he began to combine both his African American musical roots with the European music he had been taught to create written piano compositions called rags, later referred to as Ragtime. These mentors gave Scott Joplin a richer appreciation for the benefits of a great education and having that privilege of an education allowed him many opportunities not granted to uneducated members of his community in Texarkana. Scott Joplin became so invested in his pursuit of education and learning that he left Texarkana at the age of 20 to enroll in music classes at George R. Smith College in Missouri. Scott Joplin was so proficient at music theory when he arrived at Smith College, he enrolled in the advanced section of the harmony and composition course at the college.[21]

[20] Naomi A. André, Karen M. Bryan and Eric Saylor, *Blackness in Opera.* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 102.

[21] Addison Walker Reed, *The Life and Works of Scott Joplin*, Thesis--University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 10.

Chapter II: Scott Joplin and Ragtime

One of the predominant African American music genres of the late 19th and early 20th centuries was Ragtime and Scott Joplin was the leading composer of that musical genre for most of his adult life. He led the genre into the mainstream and helped it gain exposure all over the United States and even in Europe. Because Joplin is recognized as a primarily Ragtime composer, many would argue that the opera should be classified as a "Ragtime Opera." Others would argue that simply because *Treemonisha* possess Ragtime elements, that does not indeed make it a Ragtime Opera. This differentiation will be further discussed in chapter 5. Because *Treemonisha* has many musical elements similar to those found in Ragtime music, an understanding of the basic musical structure of Ragtime found in Joplin's other pieces, such as *Maple Leaf Rag* and *The Entertainer*, is essential because of how uniquely those elements show themselves in the opera. Along with understanding Ragtime's musical components, a knowledge of its significance to the African American community and the role the music has in everyday life and situations is also vital.

The genre of Ragtime had its birth in the late 19th century and became extremely popular around 1885 in large cities like St. Louis, which was considered the mecca of Ragtime music. Ragtime is derived from folk music created by African American slaves. The African American slaves created spirituals, which had sacred text; work songs, which had secular text; and dance music, which was usually secular but could also have nonsense syllables or no text at all. Ragtime is usually an instrumental genre that stemmed from the specific dance of the cakewalk. The cakewalk can be defined as, "A dance that parodies White upper-class behavior, originally

performed by African American slaves."[22] After the abolition of slavery, Ragtime was also influenced by minstrel songs sung by African American slaves and white Americans who would perform minstrel songs in black face. Minstrel songs usually had a secular text that derived from African American folk songs of the slaves, and some were intended to be danced to in a joyous manner. Ragtime was first referred to as "jig-time" music[23] because of the dance genre, but since jig and rag were interchangeable terms, the name "Ragtime" soon stuck to the genre mainly because it described the ragged rhythms usually played by the piano.

Ragtime and the Blues have been compared to one another simply because they became popular around the same time, but Ragtime is not sad and depressing like the Blues can be at times. The only real similarity between Ragtime and the Blues is the fact that they both directly stem from the folk songs of African American slaves. Ragtime is joyful dance music that would be performed in clubs, bars, and juke joints all throughout the central part of the United States. Scott Joplin was a firm and staunch advocate for Ragtime to be taken seriously as a concert musical genre, even though this music was clearly never intended for the concert halls. Because of Scott Joplin's push for a concert-going appreciation of Ragtime, the genre began to branch out of the dance halls into the concert halls. Joplin wanted to prove that this was a genre that could and should be appreciated by both low-class and high-class Americans.[24] As the genre began to grow, more Ragtime composers emerged, and more musical material emerged. William Schafer explains how Ragtime composers probably collected their musical material by stating, "In a sense, ragtime composers served as folk collectors or musicologists, collecting music in the air

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[22] Mellonee Burnim and Portia Maultsby, *African American Music: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), 97.

[23] Peter Gammond, *Scott Joplin and the Ragtime Era* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975), 22.

[24] Burnim and Maultsby, 108.

around them in the black communities and organizing it into brief suites or anthologies which they called piano rags."[25] Ragtime grew in popularity around the 1890s and the early part of the 20th century and became the main genre used for folk entertainment and professional strains like Vaudeville.[26]

Many musicologists have realized that pinning down a true definition for Ragtime music can be quite difficult. Instead of understanding a black and white definition of the genre, it is important to realize that Ragtime is simply a genre of written piano music from about 1890-1910.[27] Ragtime is a more precise genre than Blues or Jazz because Ragtime is not based on emotion, but it is based on how well the pianist can play intricate and complicated rhythms and melodies with complete accuracy.[28] Ragtime was influenced by the march tradition found in the music of John Phillip Sousa[29] and the influence becomes clear when noticing the most common time signature of 2/4 found in Ragtime, which is also the time signature associated with Sousa marches.[30] Ragtime also uses a similar chord structure, solidified by the compositions of Scott Joplin because of his proficiency of banjo music, to that found in banjo music of the 19th century.[31] Similar to banjo music, in Ragtime there is a melody, a bass that acts as an anchor, and some chords throughout. In the piano music of Ragtime, there is a conversation happening between the right and the left hands where the melody is in the right hand and the left hand has the duty of accompanying the melody. We find much more syncopation in the right hand

[25] William Schafer, *The Art of Ragtime: Form and Meaning of an Original Black American Art* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973), 5.
[26] Ibid., 6.
[27] Ibid., 5.
[28] Ibid., 12.
[29] Gammond, 22.
[30] Ibid., 20.
[31] Ibid.

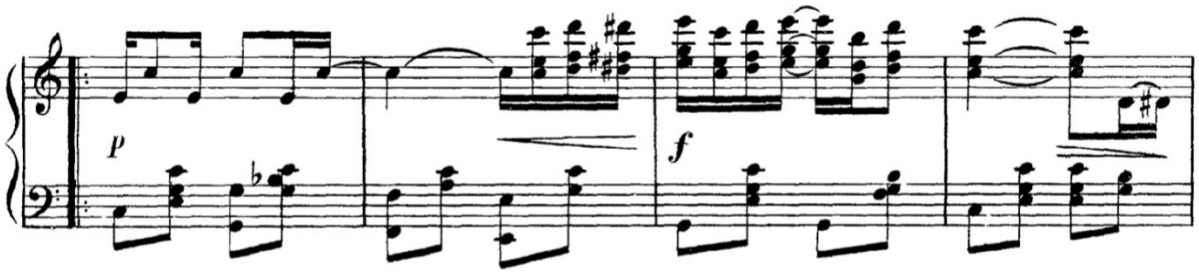
melody than we would hear in the left hand bass.[32] The conversation happening between the right and the left hands makes for complex syncopation, which is ideal for dancing and also ideal for a concert-going audience who wants to be wowed by the virtuosic playing of a pianist.

Scott Joplin can most certainly be considered the father of Ragtime because of his formalizing of what the sound and form of Ragtime music should be. Scott Joplin's compositional style for Ragtime had more European, Creole, and American influence than African influences and this gave his music a mood of haughtiness that caused his Ragtime compositions to be respected by both white and black Americans.[33] Most Ragtime compositions from Joplin and other composers use the form: AABBACCDD.[34] In the C section, most Ragtime music will modulate to the subdominant and have a completely varied melody. Two of the more famous Ragtime compositions of Scott Joplin have a few of these elements.

Joplin's compositions *The Entertainer* and *Maple Leaf Rag* have become two of the most recognized Ragtime compositions in our culture. *The Entertainer* specifically can be considered a quintessential Ragtime piece in many regards because of the standard Ragtime elements that the piece embodies. *The Entertainer* is a simple and charming piece that teaches the listener how to understand Ragtime compositions. The form of this piece follows the standard form for Ragtime that was discussed previously (AA BB A CC DD), the only variation from the regular Ragtime form is the bridge section that appears before the D section. This makes the form of the piece AA BB A CC bridge DD.[35] This piece is often referred to as the "boom chick" song because it has a boom chick continuo in the left-hand bass, formally known as the bass after-

[32] Schafer, 9.
[33] Gammond, 22.
[34] Ibid., 21.
[35] Schafer, 72.

beat.[36] The "boom" is thought of as the single bass note or octave bass notes, and the "chick" is the chord of at least three notes in the left-hand bass that alternates with the single note to create the boom chick. We find this boom chick figure almost immediately in *The Entertainer* after the intro section shown in Example 1.



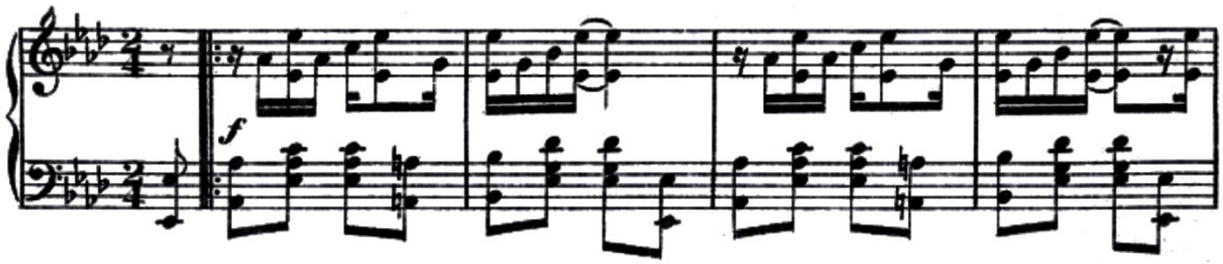
Example 1: *The Entertainer* by Scott Joplin

In the first three measures of Example 1, if we look at the bass line, we can see the boom chick occurring while the right hand has the melody with more syncopated rhythms. The rhythms in the right hand are much more complex and syncopated than those in the left hand. We rarely find mixed rhythms within the right-hand treble line, but those complex rhythms of the right hand create syncopation within itself and especially against the left-hand bass line. The highest voice in the right hand tends to always carry the melody. While there are other notes being played by the right-hand, as well as shown in the second, third, and fourth measures of Example 1, those notes participate as harmonization to the melody, which are the highest notes being played. The chord progression found in these few measures are not anything far removed from what one might hear in European classical music. The chords we find are as follows: I – V^4_3/IV – IV – I^6 – I^6_4 – V^7– I. The chords change almost on each beat at a moderate tempo that is

[36] Ibid., 74.

not too rushed. Scott Joplin's *Maple Leaf Rag* is a bit different in regard to the tempo and mood because it is much brisker and not as relaxed as *The Entertainer*.

Maple Leaf Rag is a bit livelier in tempo and more complex in rhythm. The form of this piece is similar to that of *The Entertainer* in that there are four sections that each repeat, but there is no introduction section or bridge before the final section, AA BB A / CC DD. The tempo is more vigorous than that of *The Entertainer* and the left-hand bass has a much more active role. While the left-hand is still acting as the accompaniment, the exchange of unison octave notes and chords make the difficulty of playing the higher and causes for more syncopation because of the complex rhythms of the right-hand. Example 2a shows that there is no longer a "boom chick" in

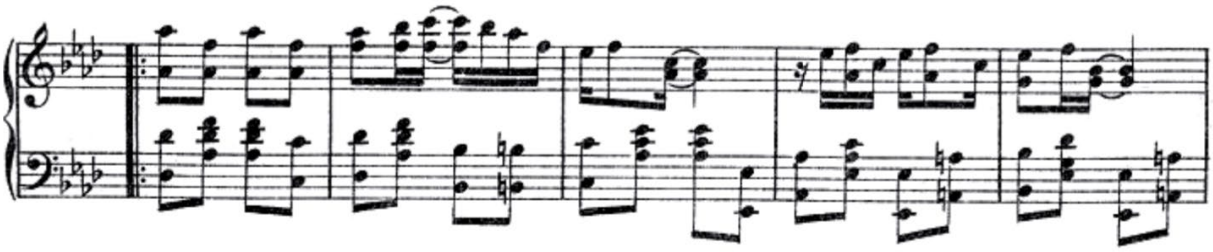


Example 2a: *Maple Leaf Rag* by Scott Joplin

the left-hand bass, like what we heard in *The Entertainer*, but the left-hand has a "boom boom chick chick" with two octave notes starting on the pickup of the first beat followed by two chords. This new idea of the bass line adds to the syncopation of the piece, along with the constantly changing rhythms in the right-hand. The left-hand is usually playing eighth notes, but the right-hand treble has eighth notes and different variations of 16th notes. Example 2b shows that in the right-hand, no two measures are rhythmically the same.[37] There are variations in rhythm from measure to measure, which makes this piece sound highly syncopated and makes

[37] Schafer, 74.

this piece an ideal one for dancing in a club or bar and for enjoying in the concert hall. Concertgoers enjoyed hearing the virtuosic playing of this piece and this particular rag requires a very skilled pianist to do justice to the piece. According to Peter Gammond, the recommended tempo for *Maple Leaf Rag* is about ♪ = 192.[38] The difficulty of performing Ragtime music is that the tempo must be just right. For example, if *Maple Leaf Rag* is performed too fast, it is difficult to hear the intricacies of the complex rhythms that create the syncopation between the



Example 2b: *Maple Leaf Rag* by Scott Joplin

right and left hands, but if the piece is performed too slowly the polyrhythms could fall apart and it loses its excitement and ultimately become less impressive and no longer serves the intended purpose of being created for dance music.

Maple Leaf Rag was a great success for Scott Joplin because he was able to create a distinct sound with this rag that was appreciated by white and black audiences. This was also one of the first pieces Scott Joplin was able to publish with the help of white publisher named John Stark. John Stark, owner of John Stark & Son publishing company in Sedalia, Missouri, heard Joplin's Maple Leaf Rag in a small club one summer day, and published it in 1899.[39] Meeting John Stark really had a tremendous effect on the career of Scott Joplin and the impact his pieces were able to have on the general public because of the fact that John Stark was a white

[38] Gammond, 163.
[39] Rudi Blesh, *They All Played Ragtime,* 4th ed. (New York: Oak Publications, 1971), 32.

man who could act as a bridge for Joplin. The Stark company helped Joplin launch his music into the mainstream because Stark was already an accomplished publisher and participated as the liaison from the African American community to the white concertgoing audiences.[40]

Scott Joplin was fortunate enough to have *Maple Leaf Rag* and other Ragtime pieces published by reputable publishing companies, which allowed his pieces to gain popularity, thus furthering the genre of Ragtime nationally because it was now taken seriously as a written musical art form. Furthering the genre of Ragtime was one of Joplin's ultimate goals, which is why he decided to create an opera that has Ragtime elements to reach a wider audience. Unfortunately, the genre of Ragtime was not considered of academic interest until well after Joplin's death, so it was classified simply a dance genre of the freed African American slaves.[41] African American dance music was then, and sometimes is even now, viewed as a genre that was not worth taking seriously because dance is not considered an art that should be thoroughly studied. To the African American community and culture, however, dancing was an extremely important expression. Dancing was used mostly as a secular practice and represented a person having very few cares or attempting to dance their cares away, so this was quite an important practice for the slaves in order to lift spirits and help make the long hours of working in the field pass by quickly.[42] The importance of Ragtime to the African American community transcended just the time period of the late 19th and early 20th centuries in which the genre gained wide popularity in the mainstream.

[40] Ibid., 36.
[41] Gammond, 19.
[42] Burnim and Maultsby, 43.

A positive outcome of Ragtime joining the mainstream as a powerful genre of music is that other composers began bringing their Ragtime compositions into the mainstream. Other prevalent composers of Ragtime include Tom Turpin, Scott Hayden, Arthur Marshall, and Jelly Roll Morton. These composers all played and composed Ragtime around the early part of the 20th century and some even furthered Ragtime in order to create other offspring genres like Jazz. Jelly Roll Morton, a creole musician, was one of the leading composers at the start of the Jazz era, and he was able to take the complex syncopation and melodies of Ragtime in order to create a new sound. Early Jazz composers considered their music to be a version of Ragtime that used multiple instruments to create the Ragtime sonority instead of just solely the piano.[43] So, Ragtime music is responsible for the creation of New Orleans Jazz, which over time eventually morphed and grew into Big Band Swing music, another genre that was considered African American dance music that came almost directly from the idea of Ragtime.

We find many musical elements of Ragtime including syncopated rhythms with simple melodies, and even some early New Orleans Jazz music in the music of the opera *Treemonisha*. Ragtime was a popular genre in 1911, the year of *Treemonisha's* composition, so it would be expected, since Scott Joplin is a composer of Ragtime, that Ragtime influences would make their way into the main musical structure of the opera. *Treemonisha* is considered the first large-scale opera to incorporate Ragtime in the musical elements of the opera. This confused many listeners in later years into thinking that this must be considered a "Ragtime Opera," in the same way some considered George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* to be an American "Folk Opera." An argument could be made that if Ragtime is derived from folk music of the African American slaves, should not *Treemonisha* be considered a folk opera as well? The characters of

[43] Schafer, 13.

Treemonisha are freed slaves, but a few are well educated, which is probably why it is not considered a folk opera like Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*, where not one of the characters in the story is well educated. Having educated African American characters in the early 20th century was unheard of and more than likely not considered folk-like.

Chapter III: Operas of Scott Joplin and the Story of *Treemonisha*

At the early part of the 20th century, Scott Joplin had solidified his title as a master composer and performer of Ragtime music, but Joplin was not just interested in composing Rag. He had composed piano suites in the European classical style, marches, art song, and opera as well. Scott Joplin composed two operas: *Guest of Honor* in 1903 and *Treemonisha* in 1911. Both were mostly all African American casts and were based on positive subject matters for the African American community intended to uplift these oppressed people. There are only a few similarities between these two operas of which we are aware, but both had Ragtime musical elements from Joplin throughout. In the story of *Treemonisha*, the African American community is quite close to one another because of the circumstance in which the community was started following the abolition of slavery. Scott Joplin was very forward thinking in regard to African Americans and how they should be portrayed on stage in operatic plots. There were not any operas that portrayed African Americans in a positive light before *Guest of Honor*. Both *Treemonisha* and *Guest of Honor* attempted to do just that.

Scott Joplin's first opera *Guest of Honor* was composed in 1903 and is still considered the second large work composed by him even though the opera was only one act in length. This one act opera is one that clearly should without question be considered a Ragtime Opera because all 12 numbers in the opera were rags with syncopated rhythms and simple melodies similar to the music of Joplin's *The Entertainer* and *Maple Leaf Rag*. Never before had the two genres of Ragtime and Opera combined to create a new aesthetic. Scott Joplin took a musical form like Ragtime, which was considered a low form of entertainment mainly because it was a predominately African American genre typically performed in clubs and bars, and fused it into opera, which was then, and even in modern times, considered one of the highest and most

respected musical forms. Very little is known about this opera, but it is widely believed that Scott Joplin was struck with the idea for this opera after President Theodore Roosevelt invited Booker T. Washington to the White house.[44] An African American leader being invited to visit the white House was quite the controversial event at the time and Scott Joplin wanted to honor Booker T. Washington, whom he respected greatly, by composing an opera that would deal with Mr. Washington's visit.

The first performance of the unpublished work *Guest of Honor* was a concert version in St. Louis, and its premiere was well received by some and disliked by others.[45] Scott Joplin's main publisher John Stark felt as though the libretto, which was written by Joplin himself, could have been much stronger and needed significant work in order for the piece to be marketable.[46] Joplin disagreed with Stark's suggestion and was adamant in keeping the libretto exactly how it was originally written so the piece could have a tour of performances around Missouri in the very near future. Changing the libretto would delay publication and delay the tour performances. Unbeknownst to Joplin, Stark had no intention to publish *Guest of Honor* because he felt as though Joplin had become more of a liability than an asset when it came to large scale classical works. Prior to the composition of *Guest of Honor*, Joplin composed a piece entitled *The Ragtime Dance*, his first large scale musical work that had several dance numbers accompanied by Ragtime music, but this work was severely unsuccessful. *The Ragtime Dance* had been published by Stark and was quite expensive, so he was not willing to take another chance on *Guest of Honor* when *The Ragtime Dance* had already cost him so much time and money.[47]

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[44] Burnim and Maultsby, 221.

[45] Hansonia L. Caldwell, *Black Idioms in Opera As Reflected in the Works of Six Afro-American Composers.* Thesis (Ph.D.) University of Southern California, 13.

[46] Haskins and Benson, 130.

[47] Ibid., 127.

Once Scott Joplin realized he would need to find another publishing company to publish his piece, he proceeded to set up performances of *Guest of Honor* without it being published or having the copyright. Almost immediately Joplin made arrangements to copyright the piece with the copyright office in Washington D.C.[48] The instructions to ensure copyright for *Guest of Honor* were that Joplin should send both the copyright forms and the score in the mail to Washington D.C., but when the mail arrived in Washington, the score was missing. At this time of this document, the score to *Guest of Honor* has not been found.[49]

There are many theories as to what might have transpired in order for the score to become lost. Some believe that Stark may have stolen the score in efforts to keep Joplin as a client and keep competition from infiltrating the business Stark enjoyed from the musicians living in Missouri. Others have speculated that the score was confiscated as payment along with several other items belonging to Joplin because he was unable to complete payment for the venues which housed the performances of *Guest of Honor* while on its short-lived tour. Around the time of the composition of *Guest of Honor*, Scott Joplin founded a small opera company of only a few employees who helped with the tour of the opera. The fact that Scott Joplin began to struggle financially and was unable to pay the employees of his opera company for the productions of *Guest of Honor* gives ammunition to music historians who believe the score was confiscated, and that Joplin may have sent the copyright papers to Washington D.C. without the score intentionally in hopes to rewrite the score and still have the copyright. There is still a nationwide search for the lost score to this opera and many believe that there is musical material in *Guest of Honor* that was more than likely used in some of Joplin's later Rags.[50] Finding the score would

[48] Reed, 37.
[49] Caldwell, 13.
[50] Gammond, 130.

give better insight to Scott Joplin's musical style for both Ragtime and Opera. There may be some musical similarities between *Guest of Honor* and *Treemonisha* of which we still remain unaware, but we are aware that both of the works contain Ragtime numbers. *Treemonisha* has far less Ragtime than *Guest of Honor*, but numbers such as "Aunt Dinah Has Blowed de Horn" and "A Real Slow Drag," both from *Treemonisha*, are very much influenced by Ragtime music. Both of these numbers will be discussed in a later chapter. Another similarity between Joplin's two operas is the positive subject matter. Both of these operas show African Americans in a positive light and were intended to uplift. Positivity was Joplin's ultimate goal and he was obviously devoted to telling great positive stories of African Americans, so he wrote the libretto for both operas in order to make sure the stories were presented in the correct manner.

Scott Joplin clearly believed that he should not only be taken seriously as a Ragtime composer, but also as a composer of many different genres or styles, so he was not going to allow the tragedy of losing his first opera prevent him from creating the type of music that was in his heart to create. Because of the many issues he faced when attempting to publish *Guest of Honor*, Scott Joplin took it upon himself to publish *Treemonisha* on his own with his own finances. He unfortunately was never able to see the opera performed on stage during his lifetime because of his financial struggles. Surely it was his most major work: a large scale opera that contained three acts and combined African American folk elements (like syncopated rhythms, call and response, and improvisation) along with European operatic musical elements (like arias, duets, and recitative). *Treemonisha* seems to reflect Scott Joplin's musical life - from being raised to hear and love African American folk music in the church as a young boy and then being taught the European classical style by music instructors and mentors.

The story of *Treemonisha* is quite simple on the surface but is much more complicated when examined with a closer lens. There are battles in this opera between what is right and wrong, traditional views and progressive thoughts, and superstition and education. In this opera, we have an unconventional leader in the character of Treemonisha, who is attempting to guide her friends and family in a new way of thinking that will hopefully catapult them into having a better life and treating each other with love and kindness. Through the story of *Treemonisha*, we learn the importance of a decent education when given the proper opportunities and how having that education can open many doors for people that they could not even imagine. Treemonisha is born unwanted and an underdog but is fortunate enough to be raised with love by her caring parents and community members and she passes that same love along to others even when they seemingly do not deserve it. Here is a list of all the named characters and how each relates to the other characters in the opera.

Treemonisha: The adopted daughter of Ned and Monisha
Remus: The close friend of Treemonisha
Monisha: Mother of Treemonisha; Wife of Ned
Ned: Father of Treemonisha; Husband of Monisha
Zodzetrick: A conjurer
Lucy: A friend of Treemonisha; Girlfriend of Andy
Andy: Corn husker; Community member; Boyfriend of Lucy
Cephus: A conjurer
Luddud: A conjurer
Simon: A conjurer
Parson Alltalk: A minister and preacher of the community

Scott Joplin sets the scene and gives a bit of background information on some of the characters of the opera in his written notes in the preface of the score. He writes:

> The Scene of the Opera is laid on a plantation somewhere in the State of Arkansas, Northeast of the Town of Texarkana and three or four miles from the Red River. The plantation being surrounded by a dense forest.
>
> There were several negro families living on the plantation and other families back in the woods.

In order that the reader may better comprehend the story, I will give a few details regarding the Negroes of the plantation from the year 1866 to the year 1884.

The year 1866 finds them in dense ignorance, with no-one to guide them, as the white folks had moved away shortly after the Negroes were set free and had left the plantation in charge of a trustworthy negro servant named Ned.

All of the Negroes, but Ned and his wife Monisha, were superstitious, and believed in conjuring. Monisha, being a woman, was at times impressed by what the more expert conjurers would say.

Ned and Monisha had no children, and they had often prayed that their cabin home might one day be brightened by a child that would be a companion for Monisha when Ned was away from home. They had dreams, too, of educating the child so that when it grew up it could teach the people around them to aspire to something better and higher than superstition and conjuring.

The prayers of Ned and Monisha were answered in a remarkable manner. One morning in the middle of September 1866, Monisha found a baby under a tree that grew in front of her cabin. It proved to be a light-brown-skinned girl about two days old. Monisha took the baby into the cabin, and Ned and she adopted it as their own.

They wanted the child, while growing up, to love them as it would have loved its real parents, so they decided to keep it in ignorance of the manner in which it came to them until old enough to understand. They realized, too, that if the neighbors knew the facts, they would some day tell the child, so, to deceive them, Ned hitched up his mules and, with Monisha and the child, drove over to a family of old friends who lived twenty miles away and whom they had not seen for three years. They told their friends that the child was just a week old.

Ned gave these people six bushels of corn and forty pounds of meat to allow Monisha and the child to stay with them for eight weeks, which Ned thought would benefit the health of Monisha. The friends willingly consented to have her stay with them for that length of time.

Ned went back alone to the plantation and told his old neighbors that Monisha, while visiting some old friends, had become mother of a girl baby.

The neighbors were, of course, greatly surprised, but were compelled to believe that Ned's story was true.

At the end of eight weeks, Ned took Monisha and the child home and received the congratulations of his neighbors and friends and was delighted to find that his scheme had worked so well.

Monisha, at first, gave the child her own name; but, when the child was three years old, she was so fond of playing under the tree where she was found that Monisha gave her the name of Tree-Monisha.

When Treemonisha was seven years old Monisha arranged with a white family that she would do their washing and ironing and Ned would chop their wood if the lady of the house would give Treemonisha an education, the schoolhouse being too far away for the child to attend. The lady consented and as a result Treemonisha was the only educated person in the neighborhood, the other children being still in ignorance on account of their inability to travel so far to school.

> Zodzetrick, Luddud, and Simon, three very old men, earned their living by going about the neighborhood practicing conjuring, selling little luck-bags and rabbits' feet, and confirming the people in their superstition.
>
> The opera begins in September 1884. Treemonisha, being eighteen years old, now starts upon her career as a teacher and leader.[51]

Act 1 begins in the morning with the conjurer Zodzetrick outside the home of Monisha attempting to persuade her to buy his worthless bag of luck. She almost gives into the idea of the magic that Zodzetrick claims comes with the bag of luck until Ned comes in to talk sense into his wife Monisha and keeps her from buying the bag of luck. Treemonisha enters in attempts to persuade Zodzetrick into turning from his wrongdoings of practicing conjury. He refuses and is about to wish bad luck on Treemonisha until Treemonisha's friend Remus steps in to ward him off. Zodzetrick leaves frightened but promises that he will be back soon. The chorus enters as community corn huskers singing the rousing number "We're Goin' Around" with Andy, a member of the community, as their lead. Treemonisha's friend Lucy is creating a wreath for her hair made of leaves plucked from a nearby tree. When Treemonisha goes to collect leaves from a large tree to create her own wreath, Monisha pleads with her to not take a single leaf from the tree because it is special to her. Treemonisha asks her mother to explain why the tree means so much to her, and this is where Monisha reveals that this is the tree where she found Treemonisha as a newborn baby. Completely shocked to find out that Ned and Monisha are not her biological parents, Treemonisha expresses that she still loves them and thanks them for raising her. Monisha goes on to explain that Treemonisha received a decent education from a white woman when she was a little girl, and Treemonisha passed that education along to her friend Remus. Treemonisha goes off with her friend Lucy to find leaves for her wreath and Parson Alltalk

[51] Scott Joplin, *Treemonisha; Opera in Three Acts* (New York, self-published, 1911), 1-3.

enters and gives a sermon to the community called "Good Advice." While the community members are distracted by the sermon, Zodzetrick and his fellow conjurer Luddud tie up Lucy and abduct Treemonisha to take her to the Conjurers' Lair. The community members soon find out about Treemonisha's abduction and Remus and other men of the community rush off to rescue her.

Act 2 is in the afternoon in the lair of the colony of conjurers, who are listening to the conjurer Simon tell them about all the different superstitions the community should be wary of that are lurking about, during the song "Superstition." Zodzetrick and Luddud enter with Treemonisha and explain to the other conjurers that she has been trying to turn her community away from superstition by telling them to get rid of the bags of luck that the conjurers sell to unsuspecting community members. The conjurers perform a ritual, and then Simon orders all the conjurers to throw Treemonisha into the wasp's nest. Just as she is about to be tossed in, Remus enters with a scarecrow's mask to scare off the conjurers and while they run around in terror, he rescues Treemonisha. Remus and Treemonisha make the long journey back to their neighborhood.

Monisha and Ned are lamenting in the late evening about Treemonisha's abduction at the start of Act 3 by singing the duet "I Want to See My Child." Treemonisha and Remus return back to the community and everyone praises Remus for successfully rescuing Treemonisha. Andy and the other men of the community return shortly after with Zodzetrick, Simon, and Luddud, whom they have just captured. The community members are furious at the conjurers for abducting Treemonisha and intend to harm them, but she beseeches the community to have mercy on them and not harm them. Remus then sings the lecture "Wrong is Never Right" to inform the community how they should still treat someone with kindness even if that person has

done them wrong. The community members reluctantly agree to set the conjurers free and they forgive them per Treemonisha's suggestion. The community members realize they need guidance and ask Treemonisha to be their leader. Treemonisha agrees to lead the community to the absolute best of her ability, and the entire community celebrates by dancing and singing the number, "A Real Slow Drag" led by their new leader, Treemonisha.

After examining the story of Treemonisha, it would be safe to determine that some of the characters of this opera are quite unique from other characters we see in operas both prior to and following *Treemonisha*. Part of the reason this opera may not be considered the first American Folk Opera is because "folk" means "of the people." So, most folk music and folk tales are thought to be of the land and people in the given country or region from which they came. I believe it would be appropriate to modify this perception of folk music and claim, in all actuality, that folk music and folk tales are intended to be *typical* of the land and people in the given country or region from which they came. African Americans portrayed as educated and well-spoken leaders in the late 19th century was unfortunately not representative of the people during that time, even though there are many African American folk elements in the music like call and response and Ragtime music. The main difference between Joplin's *Treemonisha* and George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess,* which *is* considered the first American Folk Opera, is that not one of the African American characters in that opera is educated, though it too uses folk musical elements such as call and response, spirituals, and Ragtime influences. The characterization of each role in *Treemonisha* is truly what sets this work apart and makes it one of the most unique operas of in the 20th century.

Chapter IV: Character and Vocal Analysis of *Treemonisha*

Each of the named characters in the story *Treemonisha* has a specific task to help further and develop the plot of the opera. As discussed in previous chapters, the African Americans in this opera vary in their education because of the opportunities afforded them. There are some characters who speak with broken English[52] as if to be very uneducated, and there are others who speak with proper English at all times, Treemonisha being one of those characters. Joplin's characterization of Treemonisha as the lead is quite removed from other characters in the opera, and her portrayal is also unique from other lead female operatic characters we find in the 19th and early 20th centuries from the operas of such composers as Giuseppe Verdi, Georges Bizet, and Giacomo Puccini. Understanding the motivation behind each of the characters in *Treemonisha* is vital to understanding the message Joplin intended to convey and understanding the vocal challenges that attach themselves to learning and singing these roles may aid future singers when asked to perform any of these roles.

Treemonisha is 18 years old when the opera begins. Because her adoptive parents Monisha and Ned believed their children should receive a decent education, she was afforded educational opportunities that the other children in her community were not fortunate enough to attain: the closest school to the community was still too far for the children to travel. Monisha and Ned were determined this would not be a hurdle for Treemonisha, so they asked a white woman, who had the privilege of being educated, to teach Treemonisha beginning at the age of seven. Joplin makes Treemonisha's education known to the listener by way of her speech.

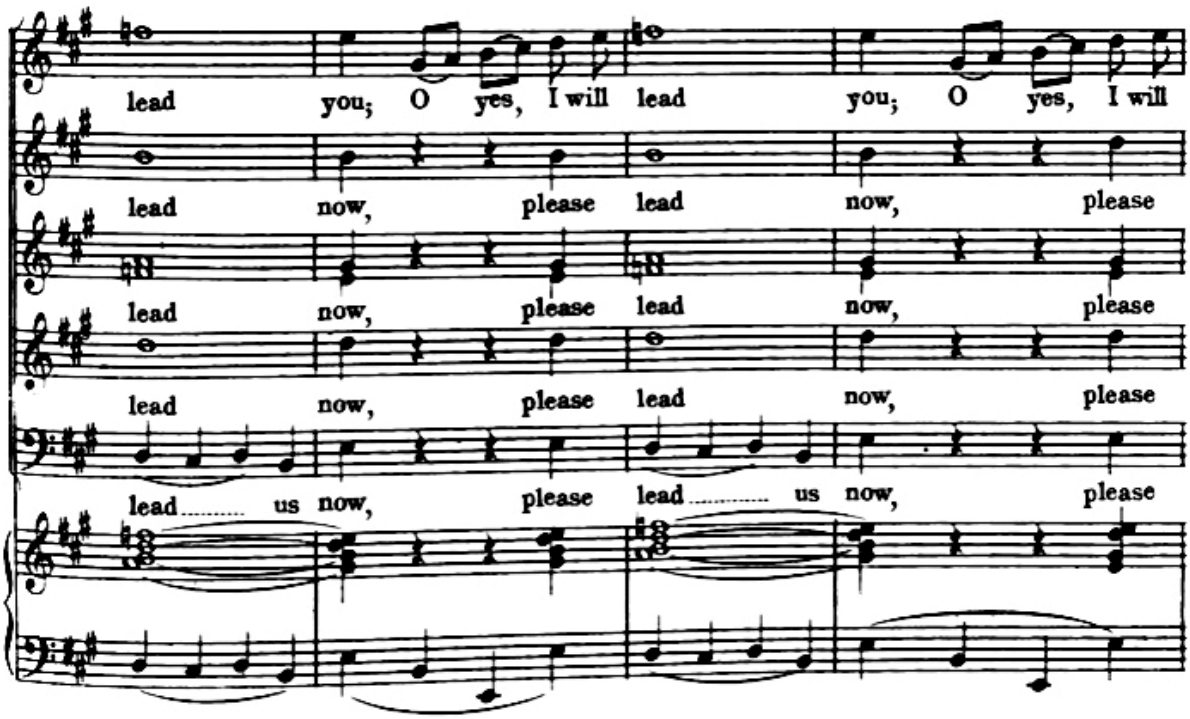
[52] The use of the expression "broken English" is used because at the time of the composition of *Treemonisha*, it was an appropriate description of this type of speech. A more modern and currently appropriate description of this type of speech is Ebonics or Black vernacular English.

Treemonisha speaks with proper English at all times. While some characters in the opera leave the endings off of words like "drinkin'" and thinkin'" and changing the beginnings of words from "this" to "dis," Treemonisha never hesitates to pronounce each and every letter in a word and this speaks to how well educated and poised she truly is. No matter how the other members of the community may speak, she has worked hard for her education and will not waver in putting that education to good use. She also believes in sharing the knowledge she has gained with others in the community just as the white woman shared knowledge with her. Treemonisha has taught her friend Remus to read so that he may act as a help to her in guiding the community and her loved ones in the right direction. Even though Treemonisha was in essence thrown away at only two days old by her birth parents, she does not use that as a reason to seek pity from others. Her main objective is to free her community from poverty, ignorance, and superstition.[53] She stays strong and perseveres against the odds of the naysayers in the community around her. In the opera, she stands up to conjurer Zodzetrick by chastising him for practicing conjury, she does not back down from her friend Andy who wishes to harm the conjurers for the wrong they have done, and she even challenges her father Ned to change his ways of thinking when he insists that those who do wrong should be punished severely.

When Treemonisha says toward the end of Act 3, "There's need of some good leader, and there's not much time to wait, to lead us in the right way before it is too late. For ignorance is criminal in this enlightened day,"[54] it was obvious by her surprise at the community suggesting her to be their leader that she had no real intention on being the sole person leading the community. As strong as Treemonisha is as a character, she still seems a bit unsure about her

[53] André, Bryan, and Saylor, 113.
[54] Joplin, 205.

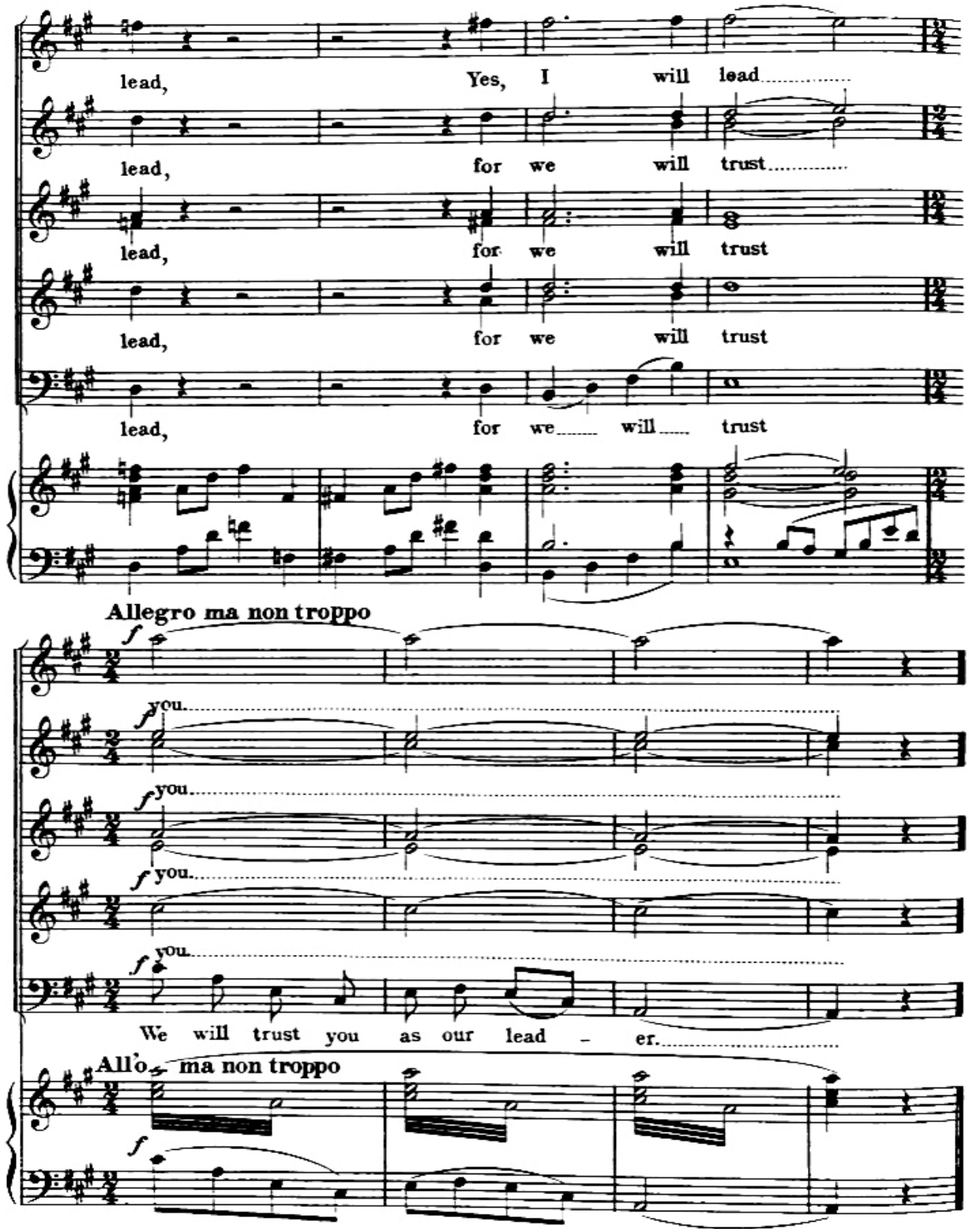
ability to lead the entire community. She seems to be very realistic about her abilities and lack of experience to be able to successfully lead the men in the community, so she attempts to potentially relinquish that duty to Remus, but the men of the community are adamant in having her as their leader. Treemonisha's apprehension becomes more evident towards the end of the number "We Will Trust You as Our Leader" when she begins singing with the chorus who is singing "You should lead us now, please lead us." She sings "I will lead you," with the word "lead" on an F♮, which is the flat 6th scale degree of the key A major being heard at this point, and this makes the moment sound very unsteady and unsure. This excerpt is displayed in Example 3a. It is not until six beats of silence from the chorus and Treemonisha pass where the



Example 3a: *Treemonisha*, "We will Trust You as Our Leader" by Scott Joplin

F♮ turns into a brighter F# on the words "Yes, I will lead" that she finally feels confident in her affirmation and then soars to a sustained high A♮ on the word "you" to end the number

confidently taking her place as their leader. This example of her shift in confidence is demonstrated on the next page in Example 3b.



Example 3b: *Treemonisha*, "We will Trust You as Our Leader" by Scott Joplin

The role of Treemonisha is best suited for a full lyric soprano but could also be performed by a light lyric soprano. The range of this role extends up to a B♮ while still having to pronounce words such as "people" and then pronouncing "working" on B♭, which is not ideal for the soprano voice and will require much modification. There are some long phrases throughout the role that will require much control, but the portion of the role that will require the most control is toward the end of the 3rd Act. There is almost non-stop singing for Treemonisha after Ned's aria, "When Villains Ramble Far and Near," until end of the opera. The ending numbers of the 3rd Act almost seem a bit unfair to the singer of the role. There is not much time to rest, the highest pitches for Treemonisha occur during this time, and after all of the high pitches and non-stop singing, she must sing numerous B♭s while dancing during the number "A Real Slow Drag." This would be a great challenge for even the most experienced singer, but it almost shows Treemonisha's virtuosity as the singer, and strength and resilience as the character to be able to get through all of these difficult passages successfully. Treemonisha does not get much rest in the opera, with a few exceptions. The main points of rest for the singer would be during Monisha's rather lengthy aria, "The Sacred Tree," in the Act 1 and while Treemonisha is being held in the Conjurers' Lair at the start of Act 2.

Remus is the brave and intelligent comrade of Treemonisha. Remus is more than likely around Treemonisha's age but did not get a formal education. However, Treemonisha taught him to read and write, so he too speaks with proper English at all times. Remus and Treemonisha are the only two characters in the opera who are educated and speak proper English. Remus clearly thinks very highly of Treemonisha because he probably has never met another African American as intelligent as she and he appreciates all she has done for him. Remus says to the conjurer Zodzetrick as he is protecting her honor in his mini aria "Shut up, old

man!" in 1st Act, "She has a level head. She is the only educated person of our race, for many long miles far away from this place."[55] There has been speculation among some musicologists about a possible love relationship between Treemonisha and Remus. In fact, Ann Sears refers to him as Treemonisha's "sweetheart."[56] There does not seem to be any love relationship between the characters made obvious in the music, libretto, or the stage directions suggested by Scott Joplin. It is up to the stage director whether to imply a love story between these two characters. It would strengthen the character of Treemonisha if they were simply friends because if the two were more than friends, it would seem that Treemonisha's reason for educating Remus is because she liked him and hoped to gain his affection for teaching him to read and write. It may be enjoyable for many modern audiences to see a love story, but the overall story can be even stronger if Treemonisha is a friend trying to better her community one friend at a time.

Remus is the heroic tenor that is typical of Grand Opera. Even though his role is quite significant to the story, he does not sing for most of the middle portion of the 1st Act and the beginning of the Act 2. He has much singing to do in the 3rd act, when we hear his aria and lecture, "Wrong is Never Right." The mini aria Remus sings in Act 1 "Shut up, old man," is not uncomfortably high and can be managed by most average tenor voices. The range of that aria is from F#3 to A4 and only lasts for roughly 22 measures. The main aria of considerable concern is "Wrong is Never Right," heard in Act 3. This deceptively difficult aria has quite a high tessitura, which requires great stamina. The fact that this aria is placed in the 3rd Act toward the conclusion of the opera makes it even more difficult to sing. The key is D major with a high note of A4, but some singers in modern performances have taken the key down a whole step to C

[55] Joplin, 28.
[56] André, Bryan, and Saylor, 103.

major to lower the highest pitch to G because of the high tessitura. Joplin wrote the aria to be sung verse-refrain, verse-refrain, with the same music in both verses and refrains, but some modern productions of *Treemonisha*, specifically the Houston Grand Opera production in 1975, have cut the first refrain so that the tenor singing Remus sings the chorus of the aria only once instead of twice.

Monisha is the loving adopted mother of Treemonisha. Monisha is more than likely somewhere in her 50s and is married to Ned, an old man. We learn early on in the opera that Monisha is relatively susceptible to conjury because of her talk with Zodzetrick in the first scene of the opera. She actually entertains Zodzetrick's conversation as he makes all these promises about how the bag of luck he is selling will make all her troubles go away and make her husband stop drinking. Monisha seems to want the best for her loved ones and sometimes can let that cloud her better judgement. Monisha has very little education and speaks with broken English, but also realizes how a decent education is beneficial. She is determined that even if she will never receive a formal education, her daughter Treemonisha will receive all the benefits that come along with that education. She only wants the best for Treemonisha because she understands that Treemonisha is an answered prayer from God and so she cherishes her greatly. She cherishes the gift that is Treemonisha so much that she will not even allow anyone to pluck leaves from the tree where Monisha discovered Treemonisha 18 years ago.

The role of Monisha is best suited for a soprano. A high mezzo-soprano could sing this role, but it might get a bit uncomfortable because of some of the higher notes that need to be sung lightly. The main benefit of a mezzo-soprano singing this role would be that a darker timbre would give the impression of an older woman. Monisha sings the seven stanza-long aria "The Sacred Tree," in which she explains how she discovered Treemonisha. During that aria,

she extends to her highest pitch of A♭ on difficult words like “beneath” and “near,” which may require some singers to modify the vowels to the point of the audience not understanding the words at all.

Ned is the adoptive father of Treemonisha and, like Monisha, is uneducated. He is an old man who was left in charge of the abandoned plantation where he and other African American families live, but he seems a bit incapable of leading the community sufficiently because of his old age. Just like his wife Monisha, Ned values a sound education, but he seems to be stuck in his old ways of thinking. His old-fashioned philosophy of vengeance is revealed in his aria, “When Villains Ramble Far and Near,” when he sings about how the punishment of those who do wrong should be harsh. Ned wishes to harm the conjurers for their wrong doings, but Treemonisha pleads with Ned and the community members to reconsider their vengeance and forgive the conjurers. Ned has his own way of thinking, but he trusts Treemonisha’s judgement and ultimately heeds her advice and alters his actions. Ned realizes that he lacks the capacity to lead the community because of his lack of education and puts all his trust into both Treemonisha and Remus, the ones who have the knowledge and fortitude to be leaders.

Ned is written for a bass-baritone, which works well to depict his advanced age. The role is written to expand about two octaves from D2 to D4, but some of the extreme lower pitches like the low Ds can be taken up an octave to make it more accessible. There is a low D at the end of Ned’s aria, “When Villains Ramble Far and Near,” on the word “near,” which would be ideal for the resonance on such a low pitch.

Zodzetrick is a conjurer in the community. His is the first voice we hear in the opera and his presence immediately introduces the belief in superstition and lack of education in the

community. Zodzetrick is an expert trickster and a creepy old man. He is so deceitful and conniving that he almost convinces Monisha to buy one of his useless, superstitious bags of luck. Zodzetrick scoffs at education and wants everyone in the community to remain ignorant so he can continue to sell them his bags of luck. If the community stays ignorant and continues to believe in superstition, he might be able to recruit more conjurers, which is one of his primary goals. He abducts Treemonisha because he feels that she is impeding his business by trying to steer everyone away from superstition. If he cannot sell his bags of luck, then he cannot eat and live. Treemonisha mentions that Zodzetrick has lived without working for many years. He does not have a job other than conjury perhaps in part due to his lack of education. He speaks broken English and he is unwilling to learn or ever change from his ways of deceit and conjury. It is safe to assume that Zodzetrick is not a member of the community because Ned actually says to him, "You's a stranger to me. Tell me, who are you?"[57] Although he is not a member of the community and Ned and Monisha do not know him, Treemonisha seems to know Zodzetrick well because she tells him, "You have lived without working for many years. All by your tricks of conjury. You have caused superstition and many sad tears. You should stop, you are doing great injury."[58] It seems as though Zodzetrick has been slithering through the community for a while, but Ned and Monisha have not been paying him much attention. It is likely that once Treemonisha turns her community away from superstition, Zodzetrick will just find another community full of ignorance to corrupt.

The role of Zodzetrick says in the score that it is written for a baritone, but a low tenor could sing this role comfortably. The role is written in the treble clef, but all the other roles in

[57] Joplin, 24.
[58] Ibid., 26-27.

the opera marked for baritone are written in the bass clef, which implies that Joplin may have intended for the role to be sung by a tenor. The range for the role is only a ninth and in recent performances, some of the sung notes in the score are spoken. Zodzetrick does most of his singing in the very first scene of the opera and does not sing again until he is in the Conjurers' Lair with Treemonisha in the Second Act.

Lucy is Treemonisha's friend likely around Treemonisha's age of 18. She is a relatively weak and minor character and was with Treemonisha when she was abducted. She could not protect Treemonisha from the conjurers and had a difficult time informing the community of what happened to Treemonisha. Lucy was tied up by Zodzetrick and Luddud just as Treemonisha was, but they took Treemonisha and left Lucy. One might wonder why the conjurers would not just abduct Lucy also, but they wanted the community to know that they were responsible for Treemonisha's disappearance. They used Lucy as a pawn to relay the message to the community that what happened to Treemonisha would happen to anyone who threatens the money of the conjurers.

A light lyric soprano is the best to offer a youthful sound of a teenage young woman for the role of Lucy. Hers is the smallest of the female roles in the opera. The range of the role is quite small, just a little over an octave. The lowest pitch sung by Lucy is E4, just above middle C, and the highest pitch is an F#5, an octave above that. Lucy does not sing for the entire Second Act but sings a few lines during the number "The Wreath" and has recitative in "Confusion" when she reveals Treemonisha has been abducted. At the end of the opera, Lucy sings "A Real Slow Drag," alongside Treemonisha.

Andy is a corn husker who is also around Treemonisha's age. Andy is an agile character who likes to dance and leads the community (chorus members) in the ring dance, "We're Goin'

Around." Andy, too, is uneducated and is concerned with seeking vengeance against the conjurers until Treemonisha forces him to set the conjurers free. Andy doubts Treemonisha briefly but trusts that Treemonisha has the entire community's best interest at heart. Andy is the main secondary tenor role. The range of the role is not wide, and he does not sing very high. The most challenging aspect of the role is keeping the high energy while singing the ring dance number. Andy does not sing for most of the Second Act.

In Act Two, we meet three new conjurers, Cephus, Luddud, and Simon. Cephus is the conjurer who seems a bit younger and less experienced than the other conjurers. He is nervous and frightens more easily than Simon or Zodzetrick. Cephus is likely a newer conjurer who came from Treemonisha's community. He has compassion for Treemonisha when she arrives at the Conjurers' Lair, having been abducted by Zodzetrick and Luddud. When Simon suggests throwing Treemonisha in the wasp's nest, Cephus pleads with the community of conjurers, "Don't punish her, she is a good girl!"[59] It is as if he knows her well and is attempting to protect her honor and speak for her since she is bound and gagged and she cannot speak for herself. Cephus is a small comprimario role that only has about two solo lines to sing. Cephus is without question a tenor because his second line soars to a high A natural.

The conjurer Luddud sings just a bit longer than Cephus. Luddud is a baritone that extends down to a low A. He sings in the Second Act in the Conjurers' Lair. Luddud is one of the conjurers who actually traveled to the community where Treemonisha lives to abduct her. When he brings her to the Conjurers' Lair, he seems highly upset with her. He paints a negative picture of Treemonisha when he tells the conjurers why they have abducted her and what she has

[59] Joplin, 117.

been doing. Simon, another old conjurer, listens to the allegations made by Luddud and gives the instructions to throw her in the wasp's nest. Simon seems to be the leader because he makes the tough decisions for punishment and does not seem to listen to anyone else's advice or suggestions. He pokes fun at Cephus who attempts to save Treemonisha. Simon only sings during the Second Act and leads the community of conjurers during the number "Superstition," in which he informs everyone of what they should fear. Simon is a relatively significant character to the development of the story even though he only does a small amount of singing. Via the character Simon, the audience has the opportunity to understand the ideology of the conjurers and from whom they received these superstitious ideas.

Parson Alltalk appears in the opera during the annual corn husking celebration to give a sermon to the corn huskers and community. Scott Joplin gave this baritone character the last name "Alltalk" because he is "all talk and no action," and much of what he says lacks substance. He tells the listeners what they should do and how they should live, but never gives any biblical scripture or proof to support anything he is saying. The question concerning Parson Alltalk is whether he is sincere in his words or only in the community to receive free corn from the members as compensation for his sermons? Parson Alltalk uses utterances like "friends" and "neighbors" to try to appear relatable to the community who is listening, and he is somewhat successful in his efforts. He is able to get the community excited with his words and make them feel good at the moment, but his sermons are ultimately ineffective because they do not change the heart or actions of the community. The ineffectiveness of Parson Alltalk's sermons and teachings become extremely evident when the community still wants to harm and abuse the conjurers who captured Treemonisha. If Parson Alltalk's sermons had any influence in the

community, they would not have been so quick to assault and beat up Zodzetrick and Luddud after they have captured them in the Third Act.

Parson Alltalk's sermons are similar to the speech given by the conjurer Simon to his community of conjurers in the Conjurers' Lair. Parson Alltalk is clearly uneducated because of his use of broken English, and he is more than likely superstitious as well like the other uneducated members of the community. He uses the fact that the community is uneducated to his advantage to spread his own ideology and theology knowing that there is no one in these communities educated enough to challenge him. Treemonisha is not present during his sermon, "Good Advice," but the community all gathers to listen. He is a distraction to the community in many ways. During "Good Advice," while the community is singing, shouting, and listening, Treemonisha is abducted. No one is paying attention. The community is so entranced by Parson Alltalk that they do not even realize Treemonisha has been taken until after Parson Alltalk leaves, and they become free from his hypnotic, useless rhetoric.

The chorus of *Treemonisha* has several roles to play to help develop the story. The chorus is on stage for almost the entire opera performing at least one of its duties. The chorus acts as the community corn huskers, the conjurers who live in the lair, and cotton pickers whom Remus and Treemonisha encounter on the road as they travel back to the community. The chorus is uneducated and gullible as they cling to every word spouted by the shyster Parson Alltalk. The community chorus remains unguided and stuck in their old ways until they trust Treemonisha to guide them. The community is an advocate for the punishment of those who commit crimes, but they listen to Treemonisha as she pleads with them to have compassion and forgive the conjurers. The community listens and follows Treemonisha's advice, but it could be

partly because they all just found out she was adopted and have compassion for her and her situation.

Scott Joplin treats the characters in *Treemonisha* and, more specifically, the role of Treemonisha much differently from other female operatic characters we find prior to and during the composition of *Treemonisha*. Female title characters for large scale grand opera in the 19th and early 20th were largely treated as less than important and viewed as gullible and weak, loose and flirtatious, sometimes only useful for sex, and incapable of love. Rarely do we ever see female leaders who can stand up for themselves against a male dominated world.

In Verdi's 1853 *La Traviata*, Violetta is a courtesan who has wealthy clients and parties all the time. She is thought to be someone who cannot love and does not deserve to be happy or in love. She is convinced to give up on the one man she loves by his father, and by doing this, is filled with terrible agony and becomes bitterly unhappy all because of what was done to her by a man whom she feels she cannot defy. In Georges Bizet's 1875 French Grand Opera *Carmen*, the title character Carmen is a gypsy woman who is a criminal and rather loose with her love. She steals the heart of the soldier Don José and he soon becomes responsible for her demise. Even in the 1904 Giacomo Puccini opera *Madama Butterfly*, a work contemporary of *Treemonisha*, the main female character Cio Cio San, referred to as Madama Butterfly, is a Japanese geisha who believes she is in love with a visiting American soldier. She changes her religion, marries the soldier, is shunned by her family, and becomes pregnant only to ultimately have her heart severely broken when the solider marries an American woman shortly after he leaves Japan.

The fates of all of these characters are determined by a male character, and all three of these characters die from either sickness, murder, or suicide at the end of their respective operas. Violetta, Carmen, and Cio Cio San are society's critique on women during this time, but

Treemonisha is Scott Joplin's look toward the future of women and female characters in opera. Joplin wrote an opera in which the title character is a woman, but unlike the typical woman of opera-past, she is strong, intelligent, and capable of leading even the toughest and most ornery and rebellious of men. The very thought of creating a character such as Treemonisha was extremely progressive, but Scott Joplin wanted to show what was possible when a disadvantaged person or group is given the opportunity to a decent education.

Chapter V: Musical Analysis of *Treemonisha*

The music in *Treemonisha* has some of the most beautiful ever composed by Scott Joplin. Each musical number in the opera has its own unique character, but they weave together brilliantly to enhance the story by setting specific moods. Joplin had the difficult task of creating an American opera that would be both musically genuine for the standards of typical European aesthetic, but also demonstrate his pride in his African American heritage in order to be authentic to the story. In the music of *Treemonisha*, there are musical elements typical of the African American community such as syncopated rhythms, call and response, improvisation, field hollers, and quartet singing. Joplin also uses components that are often associated with traditional European grand opera, such as, themes, recitative, arias, duets, and the heavy use of chorus. Each number has at least one of these musical elements, and it is fascinating to experience how these contrasting worlds come together seamlessly in this work. Listed below are the musical numbers of *Treemonisha*:

ACT 1

1. Overture
2. The Bag of Luck
3. The Corn Huskers
4. We're Goin' Around
5. The Wreath
6. The Sacred Tree
7. Surprised
8. Treemonisha's Bringing Up
9. Good Advice
10. Confusion

ACT 2

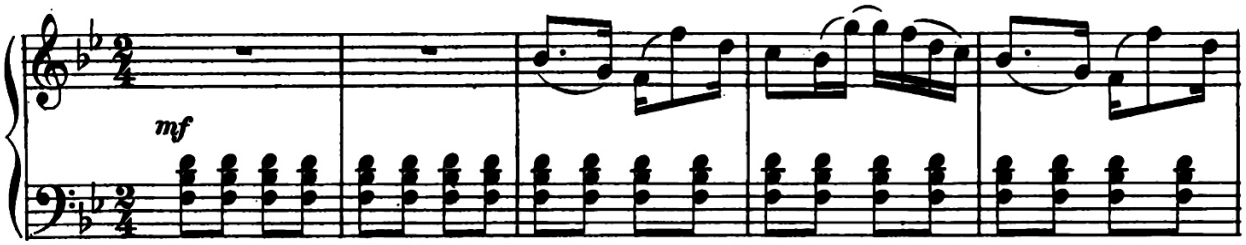
11. Superstition
12. Treemonisha in Peril
13. Frolic of the Bears
14. The Wasp Nest
15. The Rescue

16. We will Rest Awhile
17. Going Home
18. Aunt Dinah has Blowed de Horn

ACT 3

19. Prelude to Act 3
20. I want to see my child
21. Treemonisha's Return
22. Wrong is Never Right
23. Abuse
24. When Villains Ramble Far and Near
25. Conjuror's Forgiven
26. We will Trust You as our Leader
27. A Real Slow Drag

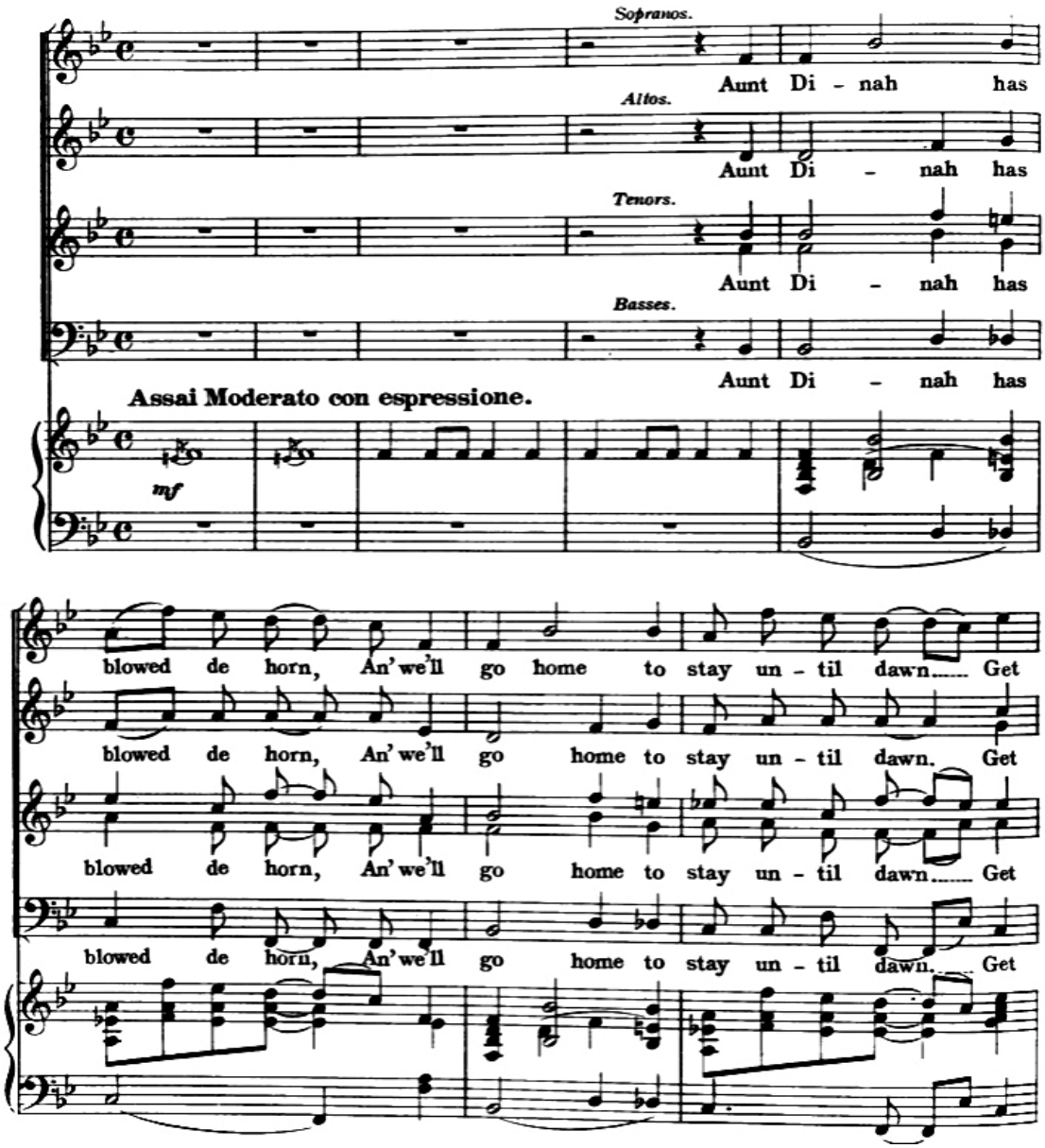
Several of these numbers have some Ragtime elements, but Dr. Thomas Jefferson Anderson, the original orchestrator of *Treemonisha*, does not consider any of these numbers to be exclusively Ragtime. He makes a clear distinction between Ragtime music and music that has syncopated rhythms.[60] From the overture to the final number of the opera, we hear the obvious influences of Ragtime, which is only expected with Scott Joplin being considered the King of Ragtime. The overture to this opera is quite different from those typical of Italian Opera because there is a unique syncopated rhythm in the right hand while the bass keeps straight eighth notes. Within the first eight measures the audience can tell this is not going to be your typical European opera. Example 4 shows the syncopated rhythms from the first five measures.



Example 4: *Treemonisha*, Overture by Scott Joplin

[60] T.J. Anderson, interview by Darian M. Clonts, November 29, 2019, Atlanta, Ga.

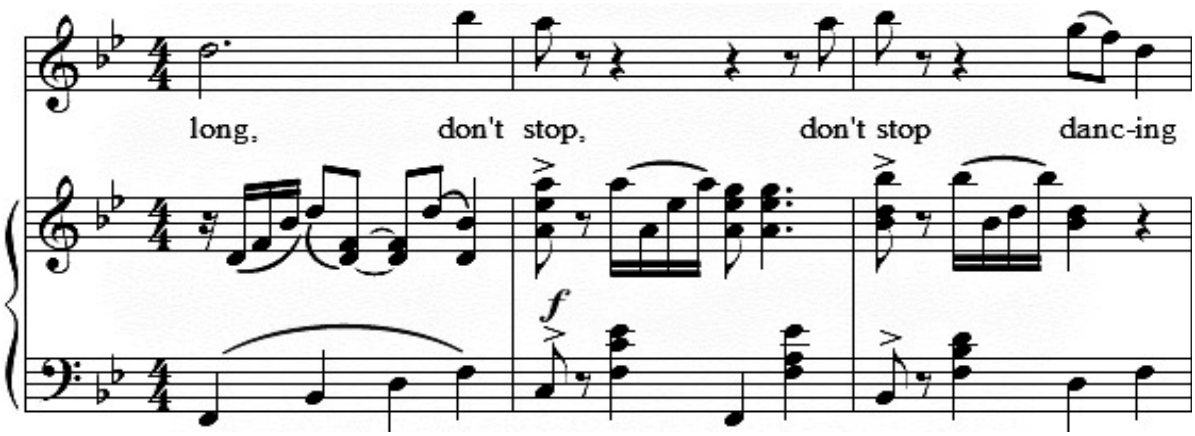
The overture is not the only place syncopated rhythms are found; Joplin uses them in all of the high-energy dance numbers sung by the chorus. The dance numbers "We're Goin' Around," heard in the First Act, and "Aunt Dinah Has Blowed de Horn," which closes the Second Act, both have many syncopated rhythms in the piano/orchestra and in the chorus parts. The word "horn" comes on the and of 2 and is tied to another eighth note to give the number a dance-like atmosphere with the syncopation. Example 5 shows an example of the chorus rhythmic syncopation.



Example 5: *Treemonisha*, "Aunt Dinah Has Blowed de Horn" by Scott Joplin

The last number, "A Real Slow Drag," not only has syncopated rhythms throughout, but it has several other elements that are typically associated with Ragtime music. It is the dance number which closes the opera and also the slowest tempo out of all the dance numbers. "A Real Slow Drag" is an example of where Joplin creates the "boom chick" (bass after-beat) sound in the bass that gives the song a steady rhythmic feel, which makes it ideal for dancing, along with an

independent syncopated melody in the treble. This figure in the bass becomes especially prominent when Treemonisha sings the phrase "Don't stop, don't stop dancing!" An example of the "boom chick" in the left-hand is shown in the piano score in Example 6. Though "A Real Slow Drag" is one of the dance numbers, it takes on a much different character than the other dance numbers that come earlier in the opera. This dance is restrained and controlled because it



Example 6: *Treemonisha*, "A Real Slow Drag" by Scott Joplin

is intended to imitate the dances performed by white people. Treemonisha gives her community members very specific instructions of how to perform the dance appropriately and accurately, and the music reflects this controlled state of being in the steadiness of the rhythm and tempo.[61] This number is reminiscent of a John Philip Sousa march because of its rigid steadiness and because of the trio section in the middle. Usually in a Sousa march, the trio section is in the middle of the piece and modulates from the tonic I to the subdominant IV, has fewer instrumental voices, and a repeat of the trio. "A Real Slow Drag" has basically the same construction. The "trio" section of "A Real Slow Drag" modulates from F major to the

[61] Klaus-Dieter Gross, "The Politics of Scott Joplin's *Treemonisha*," *Amerikastudien American Studies* 45, no. 3 (2000), 399.

subdominant B♭ major, and Treemonisha transitions from singing with Lucy and the chorus to singing by herself for the entirety of this section, so there are fewer voices heard in this section.

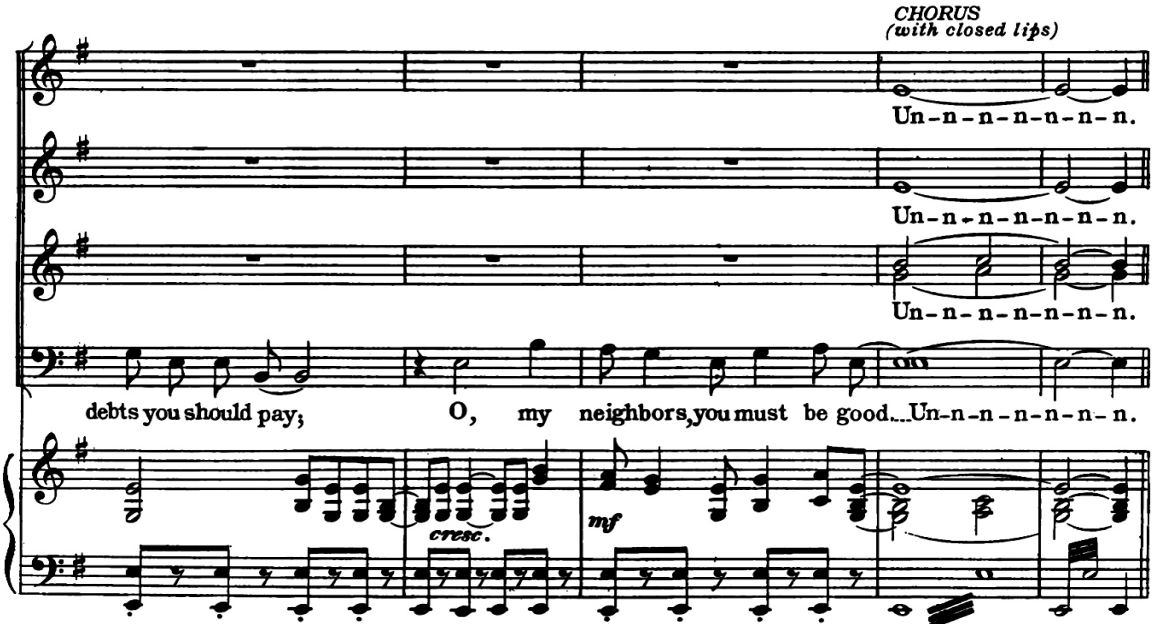
Another musical tool found in *Treemonisha*, which is most often heard in the African American church and in African American folk music, is call and response. Eileen Southern defines call and response as "a lead singer supported by one or two others, or by a group, functioning as a chorus to sing refrains."[62] Call and response can be used in both instruments and voices, but when dealing specifically with text and voices, there are usually three types of call and response. In the first type a leader will ask a question and then the chorus responds. For example, the leader would sing "Have you got good religion?" and the chorus would answer "Certainly, Lord!" The second type of call and response would occur when the chorus completes the sentence of the leader. The leader could say "Oh, would you be…" and the chorus, who responds before the leader finishes, then responds by saying, "…ready to answer His call?" In the third the chorus or group simply repeating the exact words the leader sings. The repetition of call and response is used to teach everyone the song and to get everyone to participate in singing along. A perfect example of finishing the leader's sentence in call and response is the dance number "We're Goin' Around," in the First Act. This number only has a few words for the chorus to remember. Most of the burden of text is placed on the tenor Andy, who is leading the number with giving the dancers instructions on what move should happen next in the dance. The dance performed during this number is a "ring dance" or "ring play," a game song played by African American children where they hold hands and dance in a circle, with the leader in the middle, while moving around in a circle to the beat of the song.[63] Another example of call and

[62] Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1997), 15.

[63] Burnim and Maultsby, 43.

response is heard in the song "Good Advice," performed by Parson Alltalk and the chorus. Parson Alltalk sings a verse and then asks the question to his group of congregants, "Does yer feel lak you've been redeemed?" and the congregation answers the questions by responding, "Oh yes, ah feel lak I've been redeemed." This conversation between the leader and congregation occurs at every refrain.

"Good advice" also has an element of improvisation, which is another musical tool used often in African American folk music. There is humming/moaning that comes from the chorus after Parson Alltalk says "Oh my neighbors, you must be good." These moans from the chorus are intended to sound spontaneous like one would hear from the congregation in an African American church, but Joplin has carefully written out in the score what pitches the singers should sing and what vowel they should use. Example 7 below shows the excerpt:



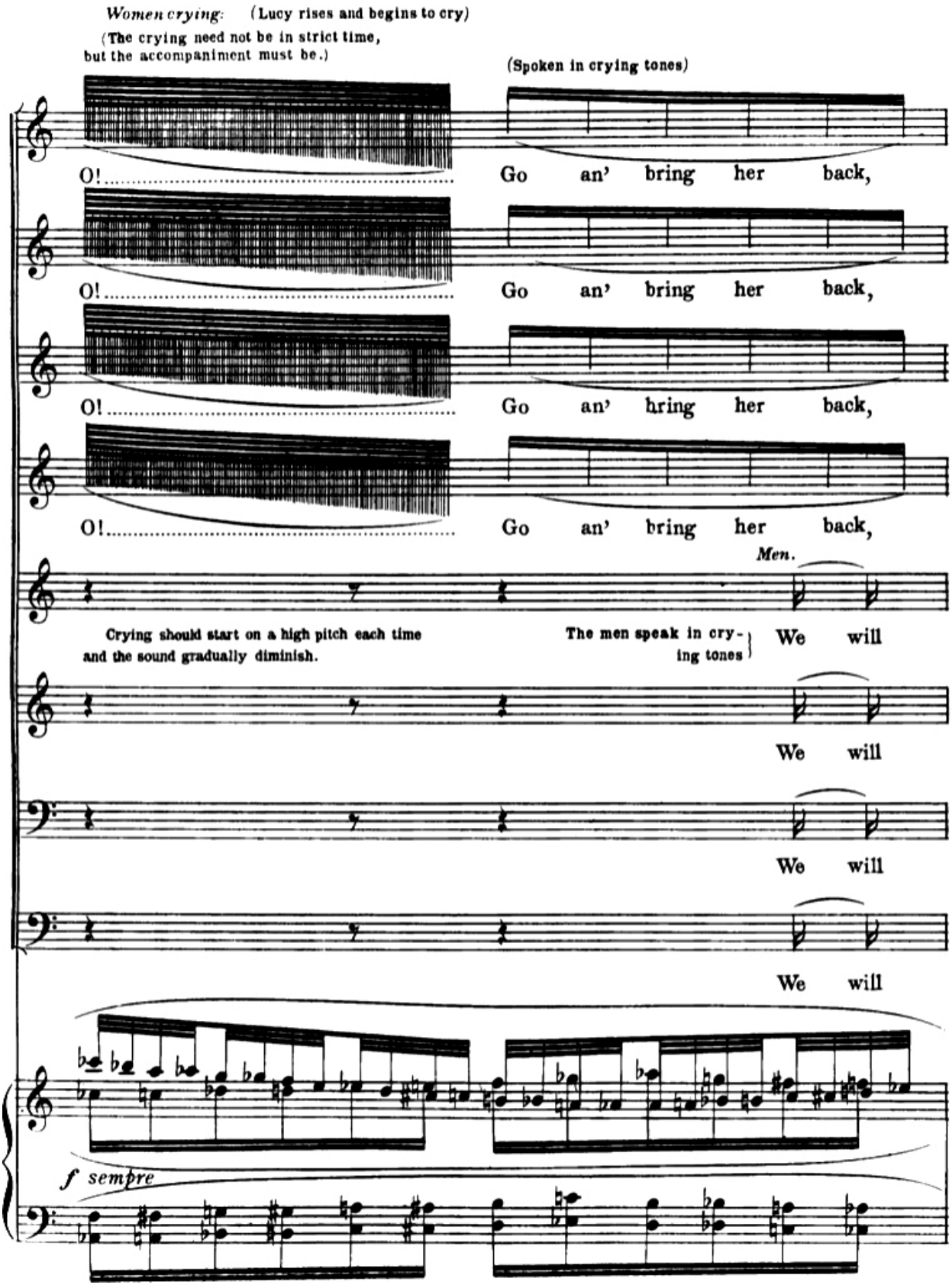
Example 7: *Treemonisha*, "Good Advice" by Scott Joplin

In the number "Confusion," there is a similar practice of writing out improvisation into the score. Joplin wanted to control what happens in the improvisation so that it would happen the same way

every time it is performed, but still sound authentically organic as if it were happening in the moment. "Confusion" is the number where Lucy has been found with her hands and mouth tied. She quickly informs the community that Treemonisha has been taken away to the Conjurer's Lair and the community becomes terribly frightened for Treemonisha's safety. At the moment the community realizes where Treemonisha is, the women in the chorus begin to scream and cry, and the men begin to yell.

Joplin writes specific instructions for how the chorus should execute the improvisation he wrote. Joplin writes in the score for the women's improvisation, "The crying need not be in strict time, but the accompaniment must be" and "Crying should start on a high pitch each time and the sound gradually diminish."[64] Joplin writes for the men of the ensemble that the text "We will bring her back" should be spoken "in crying tones."[65] This crying and wailing goes on only for approximately four measures, but the challenge is writing notes that will give the performers an idea of what sounds to make when executing the improvised crying. How would one write pitches on a staff that are not supposed to be actual pitches? Joplin surprisingly uses notation that is quite modern, but it is necessary so that he may convey the types of sounds he prefers. Nowhere else in the entire score is there notation that looks this complex and convoluted. Example 8 provides an example of the notation Joplin used and specific instructions.

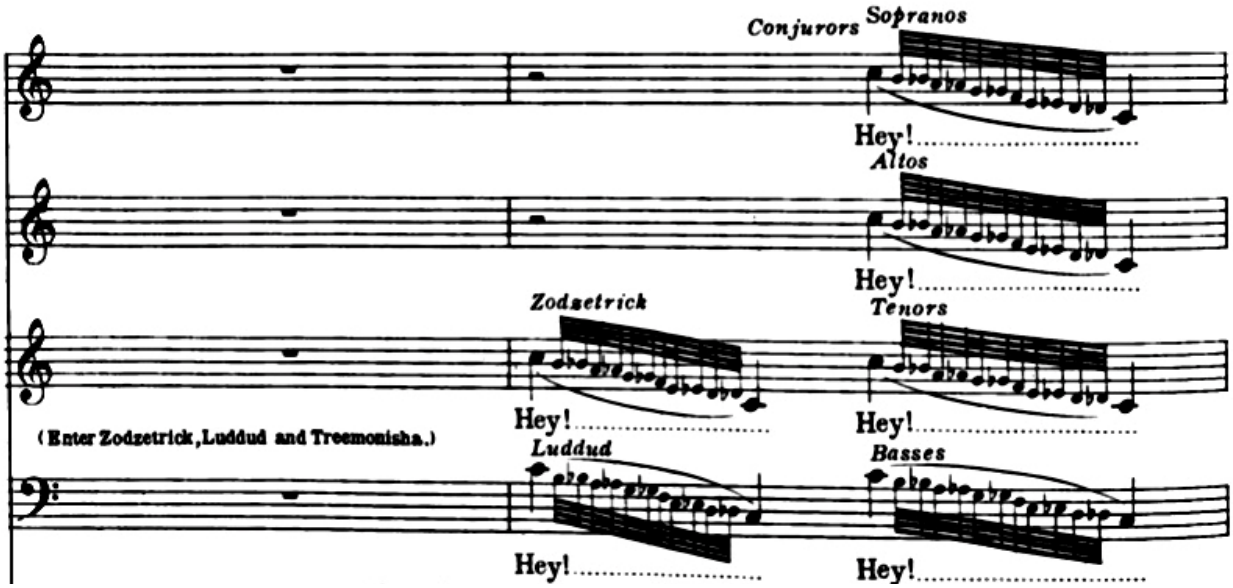
[64] Joplin, 95.
[65] Ibid.



Example 8: *Treemonisha*, "Confusion" by Scott Joplin

Another type of improvisation used by Joplin is a type of yelling done by a few of the male characters in the opera. The literal term for this type of yelling is the "field holler." Just like the crying and wailing from the women in the chorus, these field hollers are written out, but intended to sound improvised. Earl Stewart describes the field hollers as, "cries rendered in a free rhythmic, atonal style."[66] Field hollers are usually in a loud voice because, while working on the fields during slavery, the person doing the field holler needed to make sure every worker in the field heard what they were trying to say. The field hollers are first heard when Zodzetrick and Luddud arrive at the Conjurers' Lair with Treemonisha as their captive in the 2nd Act. Luddud sings "Hey!" in a loud voice to inform the conjurers that he is one of them, and all the conjurers respond to him by saying "Hey" back as a sign of trust. The second time we hear the field holler is when the men have returned back to the community with Luddud and Zodzetrick, whom they have captured. The men let out a loud "Hey" offstage to give the impression of being far off down the road, and while the "hey" is supposed to sound improvised, Joplin has given specific pitches to the field holler. The field holler written in the score spans an octave and is supposed to slide down from the higher note to the lower one, but instead of writing a glissando from the higher note to the lower one, Joplin writes every single half step in between the octave in an extremely quick 64th note. In more modern notation, a glissando is notated by a line from the higher to the lower note. Example 9 provides an example of the field holler.

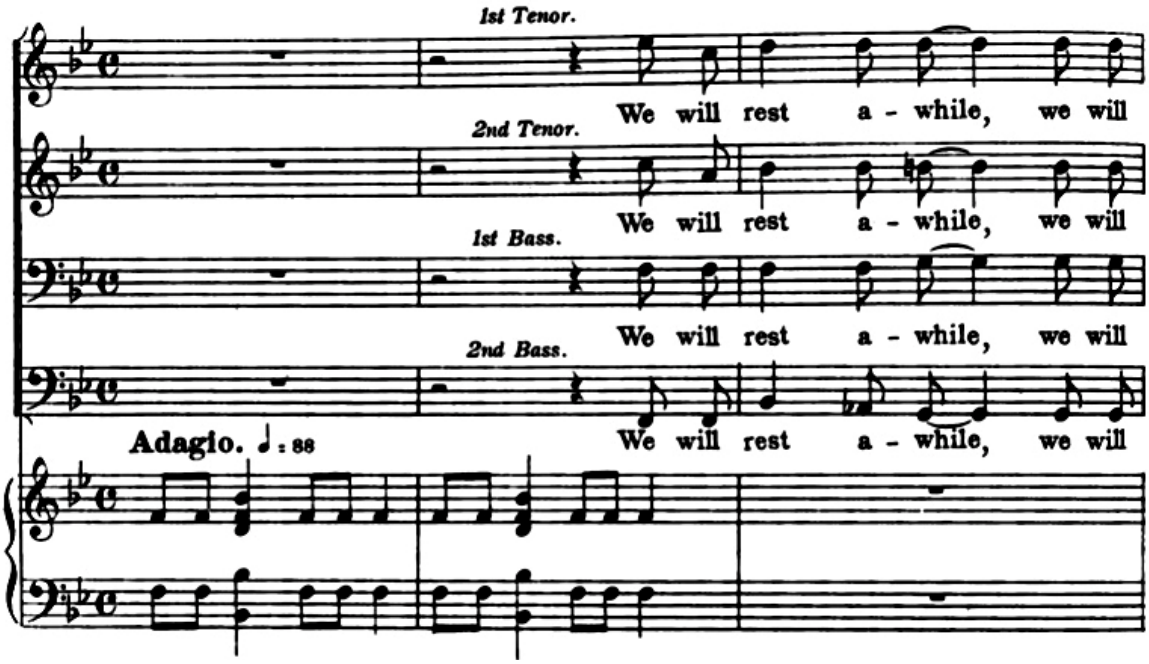
[66] Earl L. Stewart, *The Music of Black Americans: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1997), 253.



Example 9: *Treemonisha*, "Treemonisha in Peril" by Scott Joplin

One of the last musical elements typically heard in African American music and featured prominently in *Treemonisha* is a quartet. Joyce Marie Jackson defines the typical African American quartet by stating, "historically, a quartet was defined as a vocal ensemble that consisted of a minimum of four voices and a maximum of six voices singing four-part harmony arrangements in either an a cappella style or with limited instrumentation."[67] The men in the cotton field sing the quartet "We will Rest Awhile", as Treemonisha and Remus are traveling back to their community from the Conjurers' Lair. There are 2 tenor parts, one baritone, and a bass part. These parts could be sung with one or two voices per part, depending on the size of the venue. The song is mostly a cappella with a short instrumental introduction of almost two measures to establish the key. What makes the introduction so interesting is the fact that the downbeats do not seem to match the strong beats. Example 10 shows two 8th notes on beat one and a chord on beat two. Listening, it sounds as though the two 8th notes should be the pickup.

[67] Joyce Marie Jackson, "Quartets," *African American Music: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), 75.

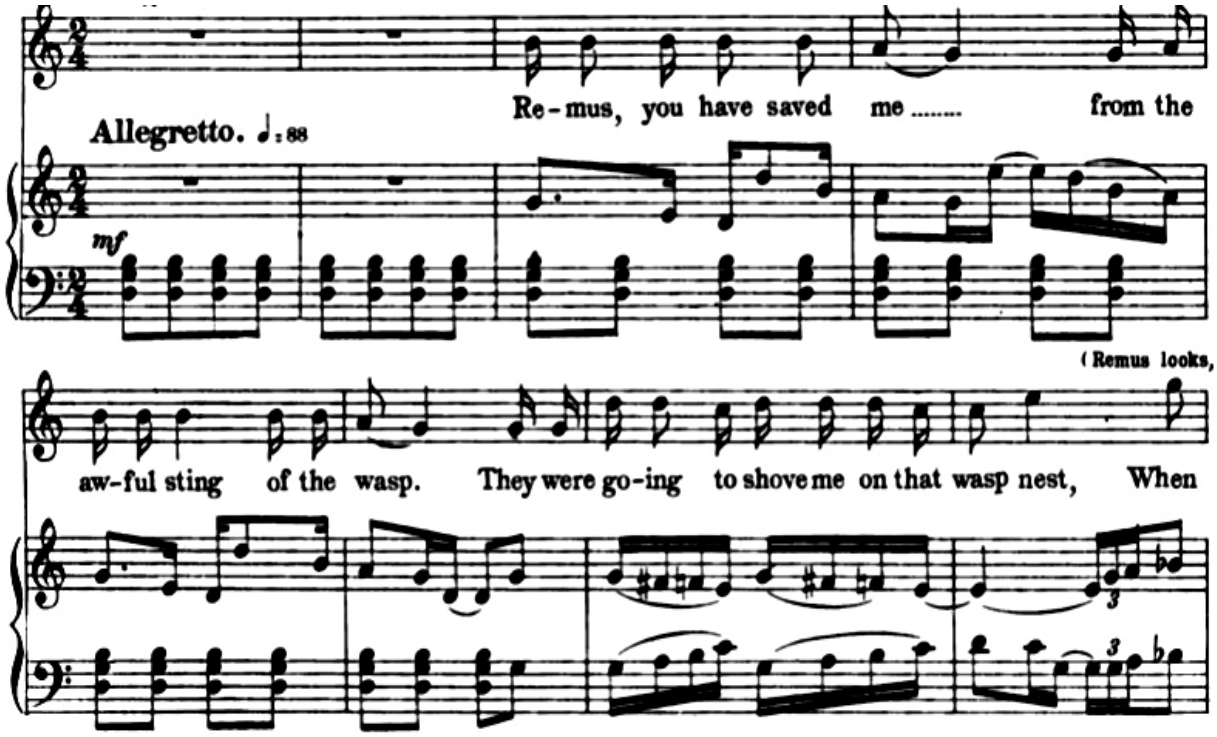


Example 10: *Treemonisha*, "We will Rest Awhile" by Scott Joplin

The entrance of the quartet is a bit jarring because it is understood to be the third beat when simply listening, but when looking at the score, the quartet's entrance comes on the fourth beat of the measure. Writing the beats for the introduction as they are currently in the score is much simpler than the alternative of writing a quarter note pickup into a common time measure, just to then change the next measure to a $\frac{3}{4}$ time signature, and in the next measure return to common time.

In order for *Treemonisha* to truly be considered grand opera by lovers of European opera, Joplin needed to use musical techniques and have musical sounds that were typical of European opera. One grand opera technique implemented by Joplin was his use of a few themes throughout the opera to evoke certain emotions. The main theme found throughout the score is the "Happy theme," which is usually heard in the key of B♭ major. As Scott Joplin writes, "This strain of music is the principal strain in the Opera and represents the happiness of the people

when they feel free from the conjurers and their spells of superstition."[68] This is the same music used in the first four measures of the overture shown in Example 4. The melody in the right hand is the theme, but the theme is never sung; it is only played by the orchestra. The audience hears this theme several times throughout the opera. The theme is heard in its original key of B♭ major while Ned is congratulating Remus when Treemonisha and Remus have returned to the community after Treemonisha's abduction. The only time this theme is heard in a key other than its original key of B♭ major is when Remus rescues Treemonisha. The key is now G major and Treemonisha sings a simple melody, different than that of the theme, with the text "Remus, you have saved me from the awful sting of the wasp." Example 11 shows where the "Happy Theme" is heard for the first time in G major with the different melody sung by Treemonisha above it.



Example 11: *Treemonisha*, "The Rescue" by Scott Joplin

[68] Scott Joplin, Vera Brodsky Lawrence, and Rudi Blesh, *The collected works of Scott Joplin* (New York: New York Public Library, 1971), 7.

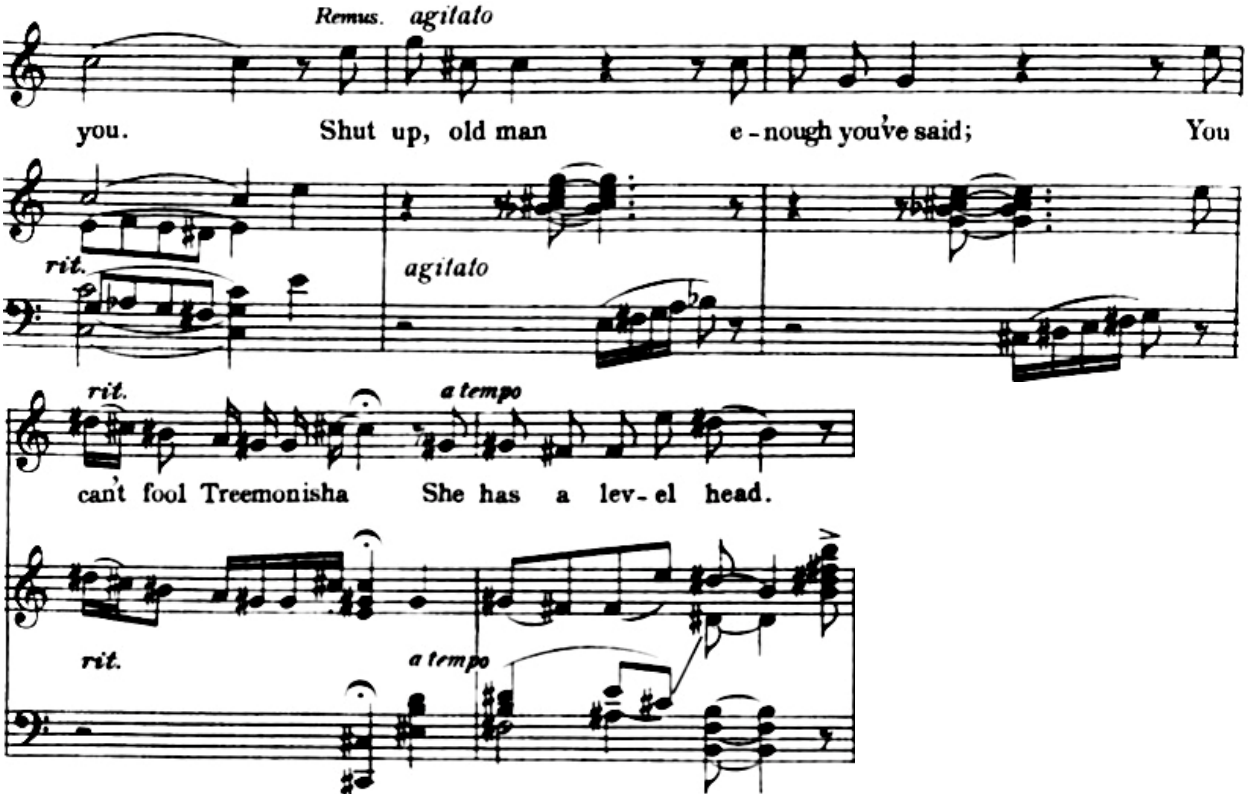
This is one of the few times the happy theme is not in B♭ major, but the melody remains the same. The melody of this theme is based on the pentatonic scale, which was often used in African American folk music. In just the use of this theme, Joplin has combined African American and European musical ideas into one cohesive unit.

B♭ major used in this theme should also be considered "Treemonisha's key."[69] This is the key that is most often associated with Treemonisha throughout the opera, as it is first heard in the First Act when Treemonisha begins telling the truth about the harm Zodzetrick has inflicted on the community. This is also the key heard in the trio section of "A Real Slow Drag" when Treemonisha sings by herself. G major is the key of ignorance or gullibility. It is in G major that the first scene in the opera begins when the conjurer Zodzetrick almost convinced Monisha to purchase his bag of luck, and G major is also the key used during most of Parson Alltalk's sermon. The key of G major only serves a positive purpose when it is used for the happy theme when Treemonisha is rescued, but this could be because she is still in the Conjurers' Lair, a place of ignorance and superstition, G major is indeed "happy" at that point, but Joplin is reminding the audience that Treemonisha is still in the Lair by leaving her in G major.

Joplin uses recitative a small number of times in mostly Act I, but the recitative is not used as one might expect it to behave in traditional European opera. Much of the recitative heard in Handel or Mozart opera is mostly considered the pathway into the aria, but Joplin uses it slightly differently. The first recitative heard in the opera comes from Remus just before his mini aria in the 1st Act, "Shut Up, Old Man!" Example 12 below shows the entire short, but fiery

[69] Edward D Latham, *Tonality as Drama: Closure and Interruption in Four Twentieth Century American Operas* (Denton, TX: University of North Texas Press, 2008), 87.

recitative before Remus's mini aria with the text "Shut up, old man enough you've said; You can't fool Treemonisha."



Example 12: *Treemonisha*, "The Bag of Luck" by Scott Joplin

Most of the singing is unaccompanied, not necessarily in an established key, and the tempo is quite varied. Joplin writes the marking "agitato" coming out of a ritardando to increase the intensity of this scene of confrontation.

Another major recitative moment in the opera occurs just before the end of the First Act when the community finds Lucy bound and gagged in the number "Confusion." Lucy sings recitative when she is frazzled and scared. Joplin writes the recitative in very short rhythms of 8th and 16th notes and there seems to be no noticeable tonal center, but unlike Remus's recitative,

this one is accompanied, and the accompaniment helps with the agitation and tension of the scene.

Although recitative is used, the main three arias in *Treemonisha* are sung without recitative. The arias honestly do not require recitative because they are quite lengthy and act as explanations of the thoughts of the various characters. Klaus-Dieter Gross brilliantly explains Joplin's intentions in the composition of the arias and the different purposes they serve than those of other grand opera from Europe by saying, "Rather than expressions of emotional intensity as in nineteenth-century opera, arias are 'stories,' renderings of rationalistic morals (like Remus's and Ned's lectures in Act III), or summaries of the prehistory of the opera."[70] Monisha's aria in Act I "The Sacred Tree," Remus's aria in Act III "Wrong is Never Right," and Ned's aria "When Villains Ramble Far and Near" are all strophic arias that have a large amount of text. These arias do not modulate, but "The Sacred Tree" does have a few tonicizations to other keys before the aria ends in the same key in which it began. The simplicity of the music during the arias allows the audience to listen attentively to the text and the beauty of the voice of the singer. The text is written in an alternating rhyme scheme (ABAB), which can make the text more understandable. Below is an example of the text from the aria "Wrong is Never Right."

> Never treat your neighbor wrong,
> by making them feel blue.
> Remember that the whole day long,
> the Creator is watching you.

Along with recitative and arias, Joplin also employs one duet between Monisha and Ned, "I Want to See My Child," at the beginning of Act III. The duet only has two verses and the text is in the same rhyme scheme as the arias, but the burden of text is only on Monisha, who does

[70] Gross, 398.

most of the singing. Ned only sings with her during the refrain as she laments about Treemonisha's abduction, and he attempts to encourage her and ease her sorrows. The duet is beautifully written with a melody that has a range of over an octave with a few octave leaps. This is some of the most lyrical music in the entire opera. It is a charming way to start the final act and flows seamlessly from the Prelude to Act 3.

Joplin uses the chorus significantly for most of the opera. It is as much a part of the music and action as the principal characters. The chorus makes its debut in the opera in "The Corn Huskers" number, where they sing "A Very Fine Day" in a loud and joyous tone. The chorus transitions from community corn huskers to the superstitious Goofer Dust people at the Conjurers' Lair. There are two large numbers for the chorus while in the Conjurers' Lair. The first is "Superstitious" led by the conjurer Simon, and the second is "Frolic of the Bears," which is the only men's chorus number in the entire opera. Once the chorus transitions back into playing the role of community members, the most important music they sing is during the number "We will Trust You as our Leader." This is a lengthy and somewhat repetitive number, but it is important dramatically and musically. The chorus does most of the singing, with a few interjections from Treemonisha, but this is the only time in the opera where the chorus is featured without following the lead of one of the other characters. The chorus seems to be able to finally stand firm on what they believe to be right when asking Treemonisha to be their leader, instead of submitting to the will of other influencers like the conjurers or Parson Alltalk. The chorus helps Treemonisha end the opera with their participation in the rousing final number, "A Real Slow Drag." Paul Gruber emphasizes the importance of the chorus to the enjoyment of the opera overall by suggesting that they have the best music in the entire opera.[71] All of the stirring

[71] Paul Gruber, *The Metropolitan Opera Guide to Recorded Opera* (New York: W.W.

and rousing numbers in the opera stem from the involvement of the chorus, so the chorus shows its importance in unique ways.

Joplin was never able to orchestrate it, so *Treemonisha* remained a solo piano score until around the early 1970s when T.J. Anderson orchestrated the opera for its Atlanta premiere in 1972.[72] Gunther Schuller re-orchestrated the score for the 1975 HGO production. There has been discussion about which orchestration was more stylistically appropriate and which orchestration should be used for future productions of *Treemonisha*.

T.J. Anderson (b. 1928) is an African American composer and arranger who, before orchestrating Scott Joplin's piano score for the premiere of *Treemonisha*, was primarily a Jazz musician. Anderson's mother was a pianist who played music from gospel hymns to Chopin, so he was raised around all types of music.[73] Much like Scott Joplin, Anderson was exposed at an early age to both African American musical traditions and European classical music. Anderson joined the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra in 1970 as their composer in residence, made possible by a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, and while in Atlanta doing work with the ASO, he joined the music Faculty at Morehouse College and taught there for the remainder of his residency.

Dr. Anderson first heard of Scott Joplin's *Treemonisha* from his colleague William Bolcom when Bolcom approached him about orchestrating the piano score for the small chamber orchestra that would play in *Treemonisha's* upcoming premiere. Anderson is not aware of how Bolcom acquired the manuscripted piano score because Scott Joplin had only copied roughly 400

Norton, 1993), 201.

[72] John McDonald, *Stirring Up the Music: The Life, Works, and Influence of Composer T(homas) J(efferson) Anderson* (Borik Press, 2017), 86.

[73] Ibid.

scores, so the manuscripts were especially rare.[74] Since Dr. Anderson had not heard of *Treemonisha* until Bolcom brought it to him, he was surely unaware of the opera's historical significance of being the first authentically American opera. Dr. Anderson grew quickly to believe that Scott Joplin is "the father of American opera"[75] because both *Guest of Honor* and *Treemonisha* are operas set and composed in America, by an American based on American themes and musical aesthetics. He believes that *Treemonisha* is the first ever genuinely American opera and he also claims that George Gershwin saw the *Treemonisha* score when composing *Porgy and Bess*.[76] Dr. Anderson admits that when asked to comment on Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*, he never does without first talking about Joplin's *Treemonisha*.

When asked how he came up with what he believed was appropriate for each instrument to play, T.J. Anderson claimed to use the guide provided by Scott Joplin himself. Joplin had written instruments into the piano score near or around certain notes and Anderson used Joplin's own writings as a point of reference.[77] Schuller, on the other hand, felt the orchestrations he arranged would work better for a 35 person orchestra instead of the small chamber orchestra for which Anderson was arranging.[78] Schuller heard and understood the beauty of the *Treemonisha* score, just as Anderson did. Schuller said: "[*Treemonisha*] is a very uneven piece and certainly not a great piece of drama but, on the other side of it, it has some of the most beautiful music Joplin ever wrote."[79]

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[74] Ibid.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Anderson.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Gruber, 201.
[79] Latham, 73.

Schuller says, "When I orchestrated it, I resisted the temptation to 'do something' with it. I wrote as closely as possible to what Joplin would have done in terms of the instrumentation and abilities of pit bands of his day."[80] Anderson stated that he has intentionally not listened to the Schuller orchestration because he did not want the burden of one day having to compare his orchestration to Schuller's.[81] The score was again re-orchestrated by Bolcom soon after Schuller.

With the orchestrations of Bolcom and Schuller floating around, Anderson felt that his orchestration was intentionally used very little, and ultimately forgotten. Bolcom has since personally apologized to Anderson for essentially modifying Anderson's original orchestration, and Anderson has accepted that apology.[82] Both Bolcom and Schuller have admitted Anderson's orchestra score to be superior, and while Anderson is appreciative of the compliment, he still felt a bit invisible as an African American composer. Not being acknowledged as the original orchestrator of the score he found difficult to overcome.[83] Performance fees from opera companies is a motive for many musicians to re-orchestrate *Treemonisha*.

Although Joplin was never able to orchestrate *Treemonisha* himself, it was his ultimate goal in life to see this opera staged with full orchestra so that it could be appreciated as authentic grand opera. Joplin had an orchestra in mind when composing this work on the piano. The means in which Joplin was able to combine typical European operatic tools with African American folk elements is nothing short of genius and it is certainly unprecedented. Speaking of classical musicians, Dr. Anderson believes, "We see [Joplin] now as one of the most important

[80] Haskins, 15.
[81] Anderson.
[82] Ibid.
[83] Ibid.

creators of his generation, certainly comparable to Schoenberg,"[84] and this is because of Joplin's attention to detail in being able to weave these many different numbers into one unified large work.

[84] Latham, 72.

Chapter VI: Conversation of Authenticity

The genius displayed by Scott Joplin as he combined both African American and European musical aesthetics is a unique and innovative technique that had not yet been seen in operatic music, but this fusion of styles engendered many issues regarding the authenticity of both the African American and European styles of music. *Treemonisha* was almost deemed unworthy of serious consideration because of white America's views of African American composers and their capacity, or lack thereof, for writing beautiful operatic melodies and libretti. The characters in *Treemonisha* were not considered typical of African American folk culture at the time, as in other later operas like George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*. Even some of the musical elements of *Treemonisha* fall into an ambiguous category of belonging to neither European nor African American aesthetics. Because of these African American elements, some may raise the question about whether or not *Treemonisha* should be considered true, authentic opera or whether it should be considered a "Ragtime Opera." The struggle between European and African American aesthetics found in *Treemonisha* left some African Americans feeling as though Scott Joplin had abandoned his African American culture for white American culture.

During Joplin's life, African Americans were considered inferior and incapable of learning or producing anything worth taking seriously. Even an accomplished Ragtime composer like Joplin was still an African American and many in the white establishment believed that African Americans were virtually incapable of composing any art music or opera in the European style. Opera was a genre of music that was considered above the comprehension of African Americans, so white Americans believed that someone like Scott Joplin was incapable of composing opera and writing a moving, meaningful, and dramatic libretto. President Andrew Jackson, in one of his public statements, explained his thoughts on African Americans

composing art music. He said: "In music [African Americans] are more generally gifted than the whites with accurate ears for tune and time, and they have been found capable of imagining a small catch. Whether they will be equal to the composition of a more extensive run of melody, or of complicated harmony, is yet to be proved."[85] Because of white America's views on African Americans as people, they expected that any musical performance involving African American characters should match their overall preconceived perceptions. African Americans depicted on the stage were expected to be uneducated buffoons, and any performance using African Americans that did not possess these qualities was considered inauthentic and not true to the folk culture of the time. The characters in *Porgy and Bess* possessed many of these negative qualities believed by white Americans to be part of most African Americans. In *Porgy and Bess*, there is much superstition, and even murders in the community of Catfish Row, where the opera takes place. This comes with the characters being uneducated.

Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* in some respects is considered more authentic to African American culture than *Treemonisha* by some mainly because of the depiction of the characters. In comparison to the two main educated characters of *Treemonisha*, Treemonisha and Remus, both Porgy and Bess have their individual set of issues. Porgy is an uneducated poor cripple and is subject to believing superstition, and Bess is an uneducated drug addict who is gullible and loose when it comes to whom she loves. Bess has an abusive ex-boyfriend who also does drugs, drinks, and commits a murder in the community. A character in *Porgy and Bess* who is similar to the character Zodzetrick from *Treemonisha* is the tenor Sportin' Life, who is a drug dealer in the community of Catfish Row and a perpetuator of superstition. There are no educated characters in *Porgy and Bess* and the community is riddled with murders, drugs, and superstition.

[85] Caldwell, 56.

The characters of *Porgy and Bess* embody what was typically thought of African American people at the time because of the characters' inferiority and ignorance. The characters in *Treemonisha* are atypical because of Treemonisha's and Remus's education, and the way the community turns from ignorance and superstition at the end of the opera, with Treemonisha as their leader.

While others believed the characters of *Porgy and Bess* seemed to be closely along the lines of reality for African American culture, others believed the African American musical elements in the score were completely inauthentic. George Gershwin was a white man who composed an opera about the black experience with musical styles such as spirituals, jazz, and ragtime, which are specific to the black community. Some African American musicians took issue with a white American appropriating African American music when he could not possibly understand the importance of said music and had not lived the experiences necessary to understand. Famous mid-20th century chorus master and spirituals arranger Hall Johnson had this to say in response to Gershwin's composition of *Porgy and Bess*:

> [O]ur [African American] folk-culture is like the growth of some hardy, yet exotic, shrub, whose fragrance never fails to delight discriminating nostrils even when there is no interest in the depths of its roots. But when the leaves are gathered by strange hands they soon wither, and when cuttings are transplanted into strange soil, they have but a short and sickly life. Only those who sowed the seed may know the secret at the root.[86]

Hall Johnson predicted the damage that could befall a culture when its culture is appropriated by individuals outside the culture who may represent it inauthentically. Johnson also believed that Gershwin's motives for composing an opera about African American culture were insincere, and

[86] Ray Allen "An American folk opera? Triangulating folkness, blackness, and Americaness in Gershwin and Heyward's *Porgy and Bess*." *The Journal of American Folklore*. no. 117 (Summer 2004), 252.

the only ones who should be allowed to produce the type of music found in *Porgy and Bess* are the ones who had lived the experiences and had the knowledge of the importance of the music to ensure authenticity and earnestness. This point of view is similar to the thoughts about Scott Joplin composing in the foreign genre of opera.

As African Americans believed George Gershwin was out of his natural element when composing *Porgy and Bess*, white Americans felt as though Scott Joplin's attempt at composing opera was poor and inauthentic because he was an African American. How could he have the knowledge to compose in a European, high-art genre like opera? Even Scott Joplin's own publisher John Stark was skeptical about publishing a large Joplin work in a genre in which Stark felt that Joplin did not belong. Scott Joplin was a Ragtime composer and Ragtime was considered one of the lowest musical art forms in the late 19th and early 20th centuries because it was associated with dance halls and loose living, so many surely did not take very seriously a Ragtime composer like Scott Joplin combining this low African American genre of music with such a high European genre like opera. Scott Joplin was intentional about the "bridging of the racial gap" between the two worlds of Ragtime and Opera.[87]

With this groundbreaking work, we have the creation of new sounds and a new aesthetic. There is now the beauty of African American folk music being heard in a purely American opera like *Treemonisha*. John Dizikes describes the beauty found by fusing these worlds together by saying, "*Treemonisha* is an odd, finally compelling opera, fragile in its charm, moving in its appeal, in its naive mingling of old forms and new spirit. Its music, formal and syncopated, has

[87] Gross, 394.

the grave stateliness and classical dignity of a sung ballet."[88] A perfect example of this fusion is found in the overture of *Treemonisha*. We can find both African American elements and European elements in this overture. The main melody in the first six measures of the overture, described as the "happy theme," is highly syncopated, just as we would find in Ragtime music. The lower ranged instruments are playing chords that accompany the syncopated rhythms found in the higher ranged instruments. While the rhythmic syncopations of the melody expose the African American musical elements, the form of the overture reveal the European elements. Since there are indeed Ragtime elements in the overture, one might assume that the form of the overall overture would take on that of a typical ragtime piece, AA-BB-A-CC-DD, but it does not. The form of the overture is typical of the classical Rondo form, AA-BB-A-C-D-AA, found, for instance, in the last movement of Mozart's Piano Sonata No. 13 in B-Flat major, and in movement two of Beethoven's Fourth Symphony. By just the very nature of the overture, Scott Joplin has shown that it is indeed possible to combine African American and European elements by not just simply combining genres, but by the fusion of musical idioms.

Some musical elements, heard in most classical European opera, are found in the music of *Treemonisha* for both the singers and the orchestra. For example, the overture displays the different melodies and themes that are soon to be heard in the work. The overture takes on the journey of the opera before the audience gets the opportunity hear it in its entirety and foreshadows what is to come. There is also an orchestral interlude between Acts 2 and 3 which is a common practice of composers of Grand Opera such as Bizet in his composition of *Carmen*, where he writes a quiet and rather slow interlude between Acts 2 and 3. Vocally, there is

[88] John Dizikes, *Opera in America: A Cultural History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 394.

constant singing throughout the opera. There is not any spoken text written in the score, although some performers in the Houston Grand Opera production changed some of the text from sung pitches to spoken text. There is use of some recitative and quite a few arias. The arias help express the most important thoughts of the characters and bring to life moments in the drama that are integral to furthering the plot. Another aspect of true opera is the use of chorus, which this work definitely exemplifies. The chorus acts as towns people and community workers who are just as important as the principle characters, as we find in Romantic Opera of the 19th century, and not "park and bark," as is often the job of the chorus in opera of the 18th century.

Scott Joplin studied the operas of Mozart and Wagner at a young age and grew to love the art of opera. Even though he was a composer of Ragtime, Scott Joplin enjoyed opera and saw no harm in using the musical ideas he learned from his family and community in Texarkana to expand into the genre of opera. Even though this opera was intended to uplift the African American community, the overall message in *Treemonisha* had the undertone that an African American can only be great or accomplish great feats when he or she has embraced or adapted to the culture of white America. It was believed during the time that these were Joplin's views and ideals because he was composing in a predominantly white genre and using European idioms, and the composition was somewhat alluding to the superiority of white culture. Some leaders in the African American community in the early 20th century took great issue with these ideas, one of whom being Marcus Garvey, the leader of the movement given the slogan "Back to Africa."[89] Marcus Garvey is one who believed that African Americans should absolutely divorce

[89] John Henrik Clarke, "Marcus Garvey: The Harlem Years," *Transition*, no. 46 (1974), 17.

themselves from white America.[90] In his opinion, since white Americans treated African Americans so terribly and clearly wanted no part of them, African Americans should leave America and journey back to Africa within the intentions to start new lives embracing their own culture. The blending of white culture with African American culture was not encouraged by Marcus Garvey or his followers, who were mainly in New York and other areas in the eastern part of the country.[91]

Several of those African Americans felt as though it was unnecessary and inauthentic to his natural culture for Scott Joplin to compose opera, so many would not so much as entertain the idea of an opera written by the composer, whether the opera was composed to uplift African Americans or not. When first hearing the buzz about *Treemonisha*, African Americans of the Harlem Renaissance were the most vocal about Scott Joplin's inauthenticity in composing opera and they were also more than likely offended by the portrayal of the characters in *Treemonisha*.[92] Though both Treemonisha and Remus are educated and speak with correct and proper English at all times, the portrayal of the other African American characters was objected to by some members of the Harlem Renaissance.[93] The members of the Harlem Renaissance resented any showing of African Americans that could be considered derogatory or belittling on a major stage and the fact that the characters were uneducated, superstitious, and gullible made for a somewhat buffoonish depiction of African Americans. It would be safe to assume that some members of the Harlem Renaissance more than likely could not understand why all of the characters portrayed in *Treemonisha* were not depicted as intelligent if Scott Joplin was indeed attempting

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[90] Ibid., 18.
[91] Ibid., 17.
[92] Dominique-René Lerma, "A Musical and Sociological Review of Scott Joplin's *Treemonisha*," *Black Music Research Journal* 10, no. 1 (1990): 157.
[93] Ibid.

to write a story to uplift the African American community. The fact that there were a few uninformed and ignorant characters in the opera is more authentic to the African American culture of that time, as many could not gain access to a decent education post-Reconstruction. This was a crucial time in African American history, and through *Treemonisha*, Scott Joplin displayed the negatives of not having an education while in semi-slavery and the positives to receiving a decent education and becoming an enlightened member of society.

There were many challenges faced by Scott Joplin when making efforts to combine a supposed low genre of music like Ragtime with high music like opera. Although *Treemonisha* is not a "ragtime opera," it still has many ragtime elements, and it must have surely been frustrating for this opera to be shunned by white America because of those ragtime musical elements and for it to not be accepted by African Americans because of his use of European musical idioms. Joplin had such difficulty with selling music lovers on the authenticity of an opera composed by a mainly ragtime composer that he had to publish the opera at his own expense and was unfortunately never able to see the opera staged during his lifetime.

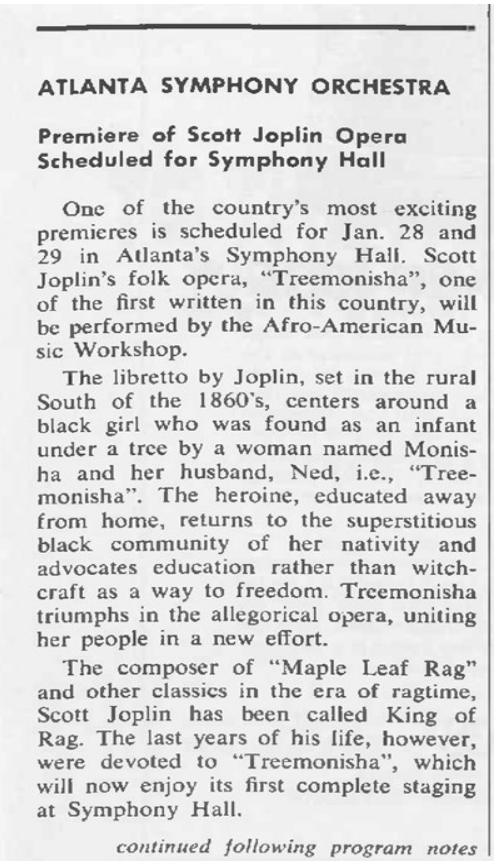
Chapter VII: Premiere of *Treemonisha*

Treemonisha has the honor of being the first truly authentically American opera written and set in America.[94] The subject matter of the opera is about American life and has many musical American folk idioms brilliantly interweaved with classical European opera elements. Even though Scott Joplin finished the composition of *Treemonisha* in the year 1911, he had several unsuccessful attempts to have a concert version in New York until 1916 and was never able to have the opera fully staged or performed at all during his lifetime. The opera was essentially forgotten, possibly in the wake of Scott Joplin's death in 1917 and the success of Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* in the mid-1930s. *Treemonisha* gained popularity during the 1970s when it was finally given a fully staged premiere in Atlanta, Georgia, which led to several other productions like the one at the Houston Grand Opera in the 70s and others after. The cast was full of some of the most talented African Americans in the country and the creative and artistic team were equally as talented. There are accounts from reviews of the premiere of *Treemonisha* and details of how that production came to fruition from individuals who were a part of the creative and artistic team.

Treemonisha finally had its premiere in Atlanta in association with Morehouse College at the Atlanta Symphony Hall's Memorial Arts Center in 1972. The premiere was part of the Afro-American Music Workshop taking place at Morehouse college and was funded by the Rockefeller Foundation. There were two performances (January 28th and January 29th) and from what has been archived from individuals in attendance, both shows were full to capacity. What was most interesting to see during this premiere is that nearly half of the audience was African

[94] Anderson.

American, including upper, middle, and lower class.[95] The African American community was extremely excited to witness the premiere of an opera with the libretto and music written by an African American composer around a difficult time for African Americans. African Americans were excited, but white Americans and members of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra were excited as well. The picture below shows a historical clipping of an article by the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra in their program booklet where they are describing the opera and expressing their excitement for the upcoming premiere.



ATLANTA SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Premiere of Scott Joplin Opera Scheduled for Symphony Hall

One of the country's most exciting premieres is scheduled for Jan. 28 and 29 in Atlanta's Symphony Hall. Scott Joplin's folk opera, "Treemonisha", one of the first written in this country, will be performed by the Afro-American Music Workshop.

The libretto by Joplin, set in the rural South of the 1860's, centers around a black girl who was found as an infant under a tree by a woman named Monisha and her husband, Ned, i.e., "Treemonisha". The heroine, educated away from home, returns to the superstitious black community of her nativity and advocates education rather than witchcraft as a way to freedom. Treemonisha triumphs in the allegorical opera, uniting her people in a new effort.

The composer of "Maple Leaf Rag" and other classics in the era of ragtime, Scott Joplin has been called King of Rag. The last years of his life, however, were devoted to "Treemonisha", which will now enjoy its first complete staging at Symphony Hall.

continued following program notes

Figure 1: Courtesy of the Georgia State University library.[96]

[95] Melvin Drimmer, "Joplin's *Treemonisha* in Atlanta," *Phylon* 34, no. 2 (1973), 201.

[96] M233_ASOprogram1972-01-19 11, Atlanta Symphony Orchestra Records, Atlanta, GA: Georgia State University Library, 1972.

This premiere of *Treemonisha* was seen as an exciting culmination of the Afro-American Music Workshop and a great way to introduce those individuals who may have never seen an opera to one that had purely authentic American musical elements.

The premiere of *Treemonisha* was full of an all-star cast. These were some of the most outstanding African American singers of their time-from Atlanta, as well as all over the country. Listed below are the individuals who sang some of the main roles:

Treemonisha: Alpha Floyd
Remus: Seth McCoy
Monisha: Louise Parker
Ned: Simon Estes
Lucy: Laura English-Robinson
Parson Alltalk: Uzee Brown, Jr.

Along with the all-star cast came an outstanding musical and creative team. Some of the musicians came from Atlanta, but some came in just to take part in this historic performance. Listed below are the individuals involved in putting the production together from an artistic standpoint:

Stage Director: Katherine Dunham
Music Director: Wendell Whalum
Conductor: Robert Shaw
Orchestra: The Atlanta Symphony Orchestra
Orchestration: T.J. Anderson

As referenced earlier, Scott Joplin only wrote the piano score to *Treemonisha* and it was never fully orchestrated until Dr. T.J. Anderson wrote out the orchestrations for its 1972 premiere in Atlanta. The chorus was made up of the Morehouse College Glee Club, students from Spelman College, and local singers from churches and the community at large.[97]

[97] Drimmer, 201.

The stage director for the premiere of *Treemonisha*, Katherine Dunham (1909-2006), had an outstanding reputation as a dance choreographer throughout the nation and she both directed and choreographed the dancing in *Treemonisha*. Ms. Dunham choreographed a hoedown type dance for the chorus and dancers that was both very exciting and appropriate for the period. Ms. Dunham was of both white and black descent, so she was understandably a strong advocate for racial equality.

The music director for the premiere of *Treemonisha*, Wendell Whalum (1931-1987), was an African American professor of music at Morehouse College and the director of the Morehouse College Glee Club from 1953 until his death in 1987. Dr. Whalum was an arranger of hymns and spirituals and undoubtably an expert in African American music. He was one of the most admired and well-connected musicians and scholars in Atlanta and was also very good friends with T.J. Anderson and Robert Shaw. Dr. Whalum played an integral role in the creation of this Atlanta premiere because he supplied most of the chorus and found Alpha Floyd to sing the role of Treemonisha, who was ultimately perfect for the role. It is also to Dr. Whalum's credit for the amount of people who were in attendance for both shows of the Atlanta premiere. Dr. Whalum and other Morehouse College students visited roughly 38 churches around the city of Atlanta leading up to the premiere promoting *Treemonisha*, and because he was so well-respected and made such a compelling case for the historical significance of this opera, music lovers from all over the city of Atlanta came out to be a part of this historic event.[98]

Robert Shaw (1916-1999), the conductor for the premiere of *Treemonisha* was, at the time, the music director for the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra. Maestro Shaw joined the ASO in

[98] Drimmer, 201.

1967, only a few years before the premiere of *Treemonisha*, and grew the ASO significantly, as he brought into Atlanta many talented instrumentalists from the highly acclaimed Cleveland Orchestra. Much of the classical arts scene in Atlanta is attributed to Maestro Shaw and his musicianship, even though when first coming to Atlanta, he was not taken seriously as a classical conductor because of his background in Musical Theater and choral music, and his unconventional start to his music career as a whole. Maestro Shaw believed in programming contemporary music that would give the symphony concerts variety, and he did not have any degrees in music. Even without the typical musical background of most famous conductors, Maestro Shaw is still regarded as, in T.J. Anderson's words, "One of the most important conductors we have ever had in this country."[99] His legacy is still apparent in Atlanta today and his pupils are still leading choruses and orchestras all over the country. Maestro Shaw was a chorus master who could create sounds with his choruses that were unprecedented and exceptionally beautiful. He loved choirs and was especially fond of the Morehouse College Glee Club, under the direction of Wendell Whalum. Robert Shaw was officially given the title of honorary member of the Morehouse College Glee Club because of his comradery with that choir and Dr. Whalum. It was so important for the African American community to have someone like Maestro Shaw, a white conductor, who cared about cultivating black cultural arts in Atlanta. He was an advocate for African American singers and one of his favorite African American tenors was Seth McCoy, whom he was able to hire to sing the role of Remus in the Atlanta premiere and is described by T.J. Anderson as "a very intelligent singer."[100]

[99] Anderson.
[100] Ibid.

Even though *Treemonisha* had a much later premiere, Joplin still is due respect as the originator of American opera. When asked about challenges when preparing for the premiere of *Treemonisha*, T.J. Anderson explained that there were not many challenges because everyone in the production was excited to bring the opera to life after years of it sitting on the bookshelves.[101] Anderson was always sure the premiere of *Treemonisha* would be a great success because he was more than confident in the musicianship of Robert Shaw and Wendell Whalum, and T.J. Anderson continued to boast even almost 50 years later, "I had the best singers in the world!"[102] Anderson attempted to establish a non-profit organization from the proceeds from the premiere of *Treemonisha*, but was unfortunately unsuccessful.

The premiere of *Treemonisha* was a great success and from the accounts from individuals in attendance, the audiences were beyond pleased. There was shouting and clapping from the audience during the big numbers throughout the performance. Harold Schonberg of *The New York Times* explains, "The audience tonight went out of its mind after hearing 'A Real Slow Drag.' There were yells, and great smiles of happiness, and curtain call after curtain call."[103] The audience came to the premiere expecting a traditional European opera, but they were given much more in terms of the variety of music. Melvin Drimmer explains the excitement in the theater from the audience by saying, "what began as an opera, ended as a 'soul' evening."[104] Most of this excitement came from large chorus numbers like "We're Goin' Around," "Aunt Dinah Has Blowed de Horn" and "A Real Slow Drag," which are all dance numbers. Schonberg states in his review, "Mention must be made also of the fine work of the chorus and dancers,

[101] Ibid.
[102] Ibid.
[103] Harold Schonberg, "Music: *Treemonisha*," *The New York Times* (January 30, 1972).
[104] Drimmer, 197.

most of them from Morehouse College. The dancers were an eager bunch of loose-limbed youngsters, and they were marvelous at Miss Dunham's simple but effective patterns."[105] Although Schonberg seemed to have thoroughly enjoyed the premiere of *Treemonisha*, he did have one negative critique about Katherine Dunham's execution. Schonberg believed:

> There is only one major miscalculation in the production, and that occurred at the end of the second act. Joplin…wrote the brilliant "[Aunt] Dinah Has Blowed de Horn" and made it last only a few minutes. But this could be one of the sock curtains of American theater, and Ms. Dunham should have given it a reprise. And another. And yet another.[106]

After reading the critique, it does not even really seem like a critique, Schonberg just simply wanted more of a good thing. This was probably the mutual consensus of most of the audience given the multiple standing ovations.

Some other critics, also hearing the opera for the first time, had little to say about the actual production, but more about the composition and drama of the opera itself and its future place in the operatic canon. Some, like Drimmer, were able to look back at musical theater of the last 20 years or so and see what part *Treemonisha* plays in the development of that music. Drimmer believes, "[*Treemonisha*] is a forerunner of what was later to be the best of American musical theatre, *Porgy and Bess*, *Oklahoma*, and *Carousel*."[107] Other critics around *Treemonisha's* premiere and since have felt that the opera had "a lack of dramatic impact"[108] Some feel as though there is no real dramatic story taking place. Even when Treemonisha is abducted, that drama does not leave the audience in suspense for very long. Many audience members wanted the drama found in Italian opera, and *Treemonisha* lacked a sad ending, a love story, and severely threatening villains. Although some critics felt as though the opera as a

[105] Schonberg.
[106] Ibid.
[107] Drimmer, 198.
[108] Ibid.

whole was merely "poor imitation of European opera,"[109] many after the Atlanta premiere found the opera to be charming and quite entertaining. The overall response of the opera and the Atlanta premiere was positive from both critics and opera lovers alike because of the accomplished cast and outstanding creative team.

The Atlanta premiere was a great success, so it no wonder why the opera suddenly took off and was performed all over the country shortly thereafter. This premiere led to more productions of *Treemonisha* in the 1970s, the most famous being the Houston Grand Opera production in 1975. Atlanta is where *Treemonisha* had its first official debut, but the Houston Grand Opera production was when it was first performed by a major opera company.

[109] Ibid.

Chapter VIII: Houston Grand Opera Production of *Treemonisha*

The 1975 Houston Grand Opera production of *Treemonisha* is the opera's first large scale production by a major opera company. Very much like the Atlanta premiere, the HGO production of *Treemonisha* had a wonderfully talented cast and an equally talented production and creative team. The Atlanta premiere introduced the world to the opera, but the HGO production allowed other large opera companies around the country to see that *Treemonisha* is an opera that has great music and can leave audiences pleased and entertained. The HGO production led to a few performances of *Treemonisha* in New York with some of the original cast members, as well as the first commercial recording of the opera. Along with the tour to New York and the recording, there was also a PBS television broadcast of the production by the HGO, which gave the opera a larger platform for acknowledgment.

In Houston, some singers were in the entire run of the production, while others in the audio recording, and others performed in the television broadcast. The cast for the commercial audio recording is as follows:

Treemonisha: Carmen Balthrop
Remus: Curtis Rayam
Monisha: Betty Allen
Ned: Willard White
Zodzetrick: Ben Harney

For the television broadcast, the role of Monisha was performed by Delores Ivory, the role of Ned was performed by Dorceal Duckens, and Zodzetrick was performed by Obba Babatundé. The creative team was indeed a group of talented musicians who were experts at bringing opera productions to life:

Music Director: Chris Nance
Stage Director: Frank Corsaro
Conductor: John DeMain
Choreography: Mable Robinson
Rehearsal coach: George Darden
Chorus Master: Robert Henry
Orchestration: Gunther Schuller

This team was in charge of bringing *Treemonisha* to the large opera stage with improvements made from the Atlanta production.

Since this was the first production of *Treemonisha* done by a major opera company, a few changes were necessary in order to turn the show into one that opera companies could do across the country. There were some obvious changes to the HGO production from the Atlanta premiere since HGO had a larger venue that would hold a larger audience. There were more elaborate original costumes and set pieces that helped to tell the story of superstitious and uneducated people on an abandoned plantation. The HGO used a full orchestra instead of the chamber orchestra used in Atlanta, so Gunther Schuller thought it was necessary to create a new orchestration for a larger group of players. Along with a larger orchestra, the chorus is also significantly larger. The chorus in Atlanta was comprised of about 20 singers, whereas the HGO production had roughly 50 chorus members who sang throughout and danced only just a bit during "A Real Slow Drag." The Houston production had professional dancers, under the direction of Mable Robinson, who were able-bodied and well equipped to handle all of the complicated choreography designed by Ms. Robinson. The Houston production seemed to learn from the reviews given by critics who attended the Atlanta premiere. The number "Aunt Dinah Has Blowed de Horn" was performed almost three times longer than it is actually written by repeating the main chorus. This was more than likely in response to Harold Schonberg

complaining about the fact that the number was much too short in the Atlanta premiere.[110] The ending of the opera was also in line with what Schonberg would have wanted from the Atlanta premiere, the curtain call brought back all of the high energy numbers. The performers did their bows on the number "We're Goin' Around," which is heard in the First Act, and after bowing, the dancers danced a few more times to the orchestra playing "Aunt Dinah Has Blowed de Horn," heard in the Second Act.

Accounts from members in the audience were mostly positive, but what criticism there was came from those critics who were not in the theater for the Houston shows, but instead heard the *Treemonisha* recording. There was much discussion about Joplin's use of rhyme scheme in the libretto because some critics found the libretto to be simplistic and a bit mundane. Christopher Norris, a British philosopher and critic, was one of the more vocal critics about his disapproval of Joplin's choices when writing the libretto. After listening to the HGO recording, Christopher Norris believed, "The libretto, by Joplin himself, is so inept and pathetic that one can't prevent it getting in the way of what little interest the music possesses."[111] Norris also felt as though the score lacked sincerity to African American themes compared to other operas of the time. Norris says, "compared with *Porgy and Bess*, the treatment of negro themes is almost condescendingly naïve and primitive."[112] Joplin's minimal treatment of "negro themes," of which Norris spoke, could have been an attempt by Joplin to tread lightly because of his desire for *Treemonisha* to be accepted as authentic grand opera. It seems as though some critics had high expectations for *Treemonisha* because of the types of shows and productions historically

[110] Schonberg.

[111] Christopher Norris, "Book Review: Scott Joplin: Treemonisha" *Tempo* 120 (1977): 37.

[112] Ibid.

given by the Houston Grand Opera. Despite some negative reviews, the production did well enough to be taken on tour to Broadway in New York. The Broadway run, with Carmen Balthrop singing the title role in most performances garnered great reviews. According to John Rockwell, a writer for *The New York Times*, Kathleen Battle sang the matinee performances in the Uris Theater and was very successful.[113] Although this was clearly a performance of the opera *Treemonisha* in New York, Rockwell's review might lead one to believe that he thought it was supposed to be a typical Broadway musical because he mentions the poor amplification. In his opinion, the lack of amplification made it difficult to hear some of the singers over the orchestra. Amplification of the singers is not typical of opera performances, but it is typical of musical theater and New York Broadway performances.[114]

The HGO New York performances were conducted by orchestrator and composer Gunther Schuller instead of John DeMain, but the shows used the same staging and costumes as in the Houston production. These performances were held at the Uris Theater and ran from October 15th to November 2nd in 1975. The theater housed a large audience of about 1,900 seats. This theater is currently known as the George Gershwin Theater on Broadway. The production moved to the Palace Theater to run from November 4th to December 21st. This theater was only a bit smaller, housing only 1,600 seats. The tour to New York gave Scott Joplin and *Treemonisha* a broader audience throughout the country, as many people travelled to New York regularly to attend performances on Broadway.

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[113] John Rockwell, "Kathleen Battle is a Standout As 'Treemonisha' Stand-in" *The New York Times*, (October 23, 1975).

[114] Ibid.

The recording of *Treemonisha* produced by the HGO gave the opera more exposure. Though the Atlanta premiere was recorded, this was the first commercial recording of *Treemonisha* that was intended to be distributed for sale. The HGO recording was of decent quality and was recorded during a studio session, not during a live performance. A very positive aspect of the recording is that the entire recording is indeed separated by number, but each number seems to flow together without much of a break so that one listening may get the full experience of the drama and music flowing. This recording served as a sort of blueprint for many other opera companies as to how the opera should be performed and interpreted. This was something that the Atlanta premiere was not able to do. It is much easier to have a quality recording intended for distribution made by such a large opera company like the Houston Grand. The HGO recording is confusing because it does say that it is the original cast recording, so it implies that this is the cast used in the Atlanta production for the premiere, or that the Houston Grand Opera is where *Treemonisha* had its premiere. "Original cast recording" more than likely means that this was the original cast for the Houston Grand Opera production and not the cast seen in the television broadcast or on tour on Broadway in New York. The term "original" is a bit deceptive in that regard.

The Houston Grand Opera can take the credit for much of Treemonisha's exposure in the 1970s. The great care that was taken to learn from the Atlanta premiere and create a product that other opera companies could model is more than commendable. The television broadcast helped give *Treemonisha* a platform for other audiences far from Houston, and the New York performances stretched the reach even further. The Houston Grand Opera audio recording of *Treemonisha* is a recording is still studied even at the time of this writing.

If the premiere in Atlanta went so well and the HGO production did well enough that it was able to survive a New York city Broadway tour, why is *Treemonisha* performed so little now? This opera is not performed very often by professional opera companies. A few school opera theaters and community opera theaters have tackled this opera, but even though Houston made it happen, perhaps professional companies still believe that *Treemonisha* is not an opera worth studying and learning so that it might be included in the American operatic canon.

Chapter IX: Conclusion – Sociological Implications of *Treemonisha*

Treemonisha brilliantly illustrates a typical African American community's battle against superstition and ignorance, and toward enlightenment in post-Civil War America. As the opera develops, the audience begins to understand the benefits of education. The opera embodies Scott Joplin's philosophy that fortune favors the well-prepared mind and the idea that anyone who aspires to do great things in the world must have a sound education as their foundation. Author and music critic Irving Kolodin shares his understanding of Joplin's intended overall message of *Treemonisha,* and after seeing the opera for the first time, noted, "Education without talent may be limiting but talent without education is self-defeating"[115] Even though *Treemonisha* is a fictitious story, it is essentially an African American history lesson because the opera demonstrates the aspirations of a respectable life for freed African American slaves who were essentially abandoned with no guidance or leadership during Reconstruction. Scott Joplin himself was born only three years after the end of the Civil War, much like the character Treemonisha, so he witnessed what an awful time this was for educational opportunity in the African American community. Based on what was discussed in Chapter 1 about his educational background, it now seems almost inevitable that Joplin would create a story based on the education of African Americans post-Reconstruction, dealing with the various viewpoints of education from leaders such as Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois. It is important to note the significance these leaders' stances on education and how they influenced Joplin's views on education, which in turn gave Joplin fuel for creating educated versus uneducated characters (Parson Alltalk and the conjurers).

[115] Irving Kolodin, "Carry Me Back to Treemonisha," *Saturday Review* (September 2, 1 972), 62.

Next, it is important to reemphasize women's role in society, how Treemonisha is in opposition to the stereotypical African American female of the time who is strong, yet mostly silent because of her lack of authority, and how she is used in the opera to train her community to adapt to white American culture. All of these points of discussion, plus many more, give ammunition to the argument that *Treemonisha* is indeed an opera that deserves to be discussed thoroughly in music history and music literature courses in academia.

Treemonisha is the story of many African American communities who were living in semi-slavery in the mid to late 1800s. The opera is not only historical, but it is also quite political. It is Joplin's take on the impact that ordinary people can have on their community and nation if only granted the opportunity of a decent education. Treemonisha's leadership in her community came about unexpectedly when her community witnessed her courage when standing up, even against her father and the conjurers, for what was right at all times no matter what or who was in violation, as mentioned in chapter 4. Treemonisha is what Joplin sought to be: the kind of activist who could support his African American community by leading them away from superstition into the new world of enlightenment through education. Joplin felt as though his reach to the African American community at large was a bit limited because he was merely a timid musician.[116] He did not have the political platform that other African American leaders like Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois had, so he used his gifts and talents to make an impact on his community through his story, *Treemonisha.*

Around the time of *Treemonisha's* composition, there was a split in the African American community about how to strengthen the race politically and economically. Two of the main

[116] Gross, 389.

African American leaders and activists (Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois) were on opposing sides. Both men used their platforms to express their views on the future of education for African Americans in the 1880s and 1890s. Washington, president of Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, and the first African American to be invited to the White House, was a well-respected advocate for the education of African Americans. Tuskegee Institute, a historically black higher education institution, was founded in 1881 in Tuskegee, Alabama. Washington's philosophy was that African Americans should stick to what they were good at and invest in an industrial education, which involved learning trades in agriculture and commerce. Washington urged the African American community to be realistic in their goals for their new post-slavery world and not lose sight of what was most important, making money to provide for their families. In his "Atlanta Compromise" speech given in 1895, Washington explains, "No race can prosper till it learns that there is as much dignity in tilling a field as in writing a poem."[117] It was his belief that African Americans should invest more in entrepreneurship than in political office, and he implored the freed African Americans to see the value in physical labor. Washington hinted that African Americans could start at the bottom and possibly work their way up to the top of society by "casting down their buckets where they are,"[118] meaning that African Americans should work for money and not neglect their natural abilities. Washington believed that both the white and black races in America needed each other to keep the American economy moving forward. Whites needed African Americans to do labor and harvest the crops, and African Americans needed whites in order to earn money to provide for families. Washington felt it was poor

[117] Booker T. Washington, Louis R. Harlan, Stuart B. Kaufman, and Raymond W. Smock, "Documents, 1889-95," *Booker T. Washington Papers Volume 3: 1889-95* (University of Illinois Press, 1974), 580.

[118] Ibid., 411.

judgment for African Americans to separate themselves from white America or move to a completely different continent.[119]

While Booker T. Washington was encouraging African Americans in the more practical direction that would encourage the possibility of gradualism, W.E.B. DuBois felt Washington's views were disenfranchising and marginalizing African Americans by asking them to be completely submissive to the white man.[120] DuBois realized that they were all living in a time of heightened and intensified racial prejudice at the end of the Civil War, and he felt that, while Washington was attempting to mollify the losing South, consolation was not the responsibility of African Americans.[121] Washington's philosophy provided the atmosphere of business as usual, but DuBois was an advocate of radical change and felt the best way to evoke that change was for African Americans to gain political power to advance the race. DuBois believed African Americans should strive for higher education and resented the notion that industrialization was to be the end goal for African American people, even though Washington ultimately was not necessarily suggesting that be the end goal. While Washington's method inspired the idea of gradualism, DuBois believed in an elitism, which would allow some educated African Americans access to exclusive social and political circles in order to immediately effect positive change from within an American political system that favored whites. Most African Americans, due to prejudice and lack of education, were unfortunately never going to achieve this status. Based on Joplin's story of *Treemonisha*, it is clear that Joplin favored the principles of DuBois over those of Washington. When creating *Treemonisha*, it seems as though Joplin had Mr.

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[119] Ibid.

[120] W.E.B. DuBois, "Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others," *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: New American Library, 1969), 22.

[121] Ibid.

DuBois's definition in mind of what African American theater must be. One can see such evidence in the following statement by DuBois:

> Negro theater, must be:
> I. About us. That is, they must have plots which reveal Negro life as it is.
> II. By us. That is, they must be written by Negro authors who understand from birth and continual association just what it means to be a Negro today.
> III. For us. That is, the theatre must cater primarily to Negro audiences and be supported and sustained by their entertainment and approval.
> IV. Near us. The theatre must be in a Negro neighborhood near the mass of ordinary Negro people.[122]

DuBois's vision is what Joplin intended for *Treemonisha* to be, which is why Joplin aspired to have the opera performed in Harlem in 1916 before his death. The views of Negro theater, the advancement of African Americans in political circles and higher education for African Americans expressed by DuBois, aligned directly with Joplin's ideas. Both men were staunch believers in the power of higher education for African Americans and believed that education was essentially the salvation of African Americans.[123]

Because it was widely believed that education would be the salvation of the now freed African Americans, Joplin intended to present *Treemonisha* as an example of what was possible for the African American community to achieve, if afforded the opportunity of a decent education. While the education of adult African Americans is important, an education from childhood, just like Treemonisha received, is also essential. This ensures an educational foundation that can be built upon for years to come and hopefully lead others who are less fortunate in that same direction. Joplin believed that African Americans who were given the

[122] Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* Updated ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 292.

[123] DuBois, 23.

opportunity of an education would potentially act as teachers for those who remained in the dark, just as Treemonisha did for her community. Some unlearned African Americans only needed a bit of help from other enlightened and educated African American leaders and politicians like Robert Smalls and Robert B. Elliot, for example, who were both members of the U.S. House of Representatives and worked their way into white America's political circles. African Americans helping their own race was an essential part of the growth and development of the race for decades, and one sees strands of this philosophy in the ideology of the United Negro College Fund in the 1980s. Using the appealing slogan, "a mind is a terrible thing to waste," the United Negro College Fund mirrored the very philosophy that Joplin promoted in *Treemonisha*. The slogan also resonated in world famous African American soprano Leontyne Price's commercial for the United Negro College Fund in 1984, which argued, "we're not asking for a handout, just a hand."[124] This was very much the philosophy of the freed African Americans who wanted the educated and prosperous members of their race to reach back for those who were less fortunate. This was Treemonisha's philosophy as well, so she began educating the members of her community, one person at a time, starting with her friend Remus.

Treemonisha wished to educate her community even as the conjurers insisted on keeping everyone in ignorance for their own personal gains. Treemonisha's character, in her small community, represents the aims and potential of African Americans as a whole in America, and the conjurers on the other hand represent white people in America not allowing African

[124] Scott H. Ainsworth and Brian M. Harward, *Political Groups, Parties, and Organizations that Shaped America: An Encyclopedia and Document Collection* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2019), 983.

American slaves to read, and dismissing the possibilities of their education in order to retain power and authority over them.

As the conjurers could represent white Americans' views on the education of African Americans, they also represent uneducated African Americans as a whole who are holding their own race back from progressing because of their belief in, and practice of, old African traditions, and their fear of abandoning those traditions. Some of the African traditions practiced by the conjurers were superstition and spirit possession, but Treemonisha represents the new Americanized perspective. The conjurers and Treemonisha represent a clash of African and American culture respectively, and just as African culture was viewed as negative by white Americans during slavery, the conjurers in the opera are viewed as negative even though not everything they did was completely immoral. Although it benefits the conjurers to keep their own people superstitious, perhaps the conjurers just simply cannot imagine another way of life because a life of trickery and deception is the only life they know. This helps explain why they might have a difficult time believing their lives could ever change. The existence of the conjurers in the opera gives the audience freedom to examine those two possibilities. Some scholars have argued that in order to increase the effectiveness of the drama in the opera, Joplin could have allowed Treemonisha to be abducted by the Ku Klux Klan instead of the conjurers. While this change would have indeed been more dramatic, the battle within the African American community would have been lost. The Ku Klux Klan was and is real, and the conjurers were fictitious, and they have two very different motives. The conjurers felt the need to get rid of Treemonisha because she was infringing upon their ability to make money, eat, and survive by her desire to turn the entire community away from superstition. The Ku Klux Klan feel that their race is superior and should be the only race. There would be no direct reason for

the Klan to single out Treemonisha for abduction. Dominique-René de Lerma postulates that changing African American conjurers to the Ku Klux Klan could have had a detrimental effect on the story: "It would have been a timely turn of plot but perhaps too timely, too painful," especially for the early 1900s when the opera was composed.[125] The blow of Treemonisha's abduction was worsened by the fact that the men who committed the act were African Americans, her own people. Uneducated African Americans, like the conjurers, can do much harm to their own race and community holding them back with their old ways of thinking.

Joplin shows another example of this issue of the harm uneducated African Americans can cause to their own community through the actions of Parson Alltalk. Parson Alltalk shows the damage that uneducated superstition has on the community and the church. The ignorant feast on every word of the preacher, but the educated stay from the church to avoid his rhetoric. Some uneducated African American Christians will follow the words of preachers no matter what because of the importance of the church to the African American community. They are taught to respect and follow the leaders of the church. In the book *Souls of Black Folk*, the importance of the church to the community is emphasized by the statement: "The Church often stands as a real conserver of morals, a strengthener of family life, and the final authority on what is Good and Right."[126] Some members of the African American community place a great deal of trust in the church and its leadership, but sometimes the leadership is uneducated and yielding in old ways of thinking. This was proven to be true in Treemonisha's community. Parson Alltalk's sermon lacked substance, but the congregation did not care. Uneducated preachers have plagued the African American church continuously from the era where *Treemonisha* is set, and that poor

[125] Lerma, 158.
[126] DuBois, 92.

church leadership has affected Christianity's influence in American life even in modern times. A study conducted by the Pew Research Center in March of 2020 shows that 64% of African Americans believe the decline in the influence of Christianity on American life is due in part to the misconduct of the leaders in the church.[127] In the African American church today, there are fewer Millennials than Baby Boomers who attend on a regular basis.[128] Just as Treemonisha did not attend Parson Alltalk's sermon, Millennials have proven to have similar sentiments in regard to preachers of Parson Alltalk's caliber, so they are leaving the church.

Some may have seen first-hand the damage uneducated leadership does to the church body. This author witnessed an instance where an old uneducated preacher made a claim that all men once had a sissy rib, but God removed that sissy rib from man and created woman. The old preacher also made comments of how women should not cut their hair, men like women with long hair because it shows their glory. This preacher and Parson Alltalk from *Treemonisha* have similar sermonic styles in that they both give their respective congregations opinion instead of fact.

In the late 1800s, and in some denominations even today, people inside and outside of churches in most of America believed that women should be subservient to men. Similarly, when *Treemonisha* appeared, both white and black women were considered to be inferior to men, but blacks in general were obviously beneath whites.[129] This put black women at the absolute lowest

[127] "Views About Religion in American Society," Pew Research Center, last modified March 12, 2020, https://www.pewforum.org/2020/03/12/views-about-religion-in-american-society/.

[128] "5 Facts About the Religious Lives of African Americans," Pew Research Center, last modified February 7, 2018, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/02/07/5-facts-about-the-religious-lives-of-african-americans/.

[129] John Hope Franklin, "History of Racial Segregation in the United States," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 304 (1956), 1.

position in American society.[130] Treemonisha was born an underdog because she was a woman who was viewed as a man's property. The value of a black woman's life during the 19th century was estimated in terms of money, property, and capital assets. Black women were thought to only give birth to inferior beings, no matter the race of the father, and that child would be deemed inferior for life.[131] Treemonisha was also born unwanted because she was abandoned by her birth parents and left under a tree. Treemonisha's birth mother was possibly a black woman who had been forced into intercourse by a white man, since Scott Joplin describes Treemonisha as a "light-brown-skinned girl."[132] Fearing shame, Treemonisha's birth mother abandoned her under the tree and prayed for her safety. The story of Treemonisha's birth mother was unfortunately a common story of many African American female slaves who were raped by white men. Despite any unfortunate circumstances surrounding Treemonisha's birth and growth, she became a successful educator and leader in her community. A female character like hers was not typical for this time and Scott Joplin seemed to be confirming the power of African American women and foreshadowing their leadership in future generations. Since Joplin composed this opera in 1911, there were not many examples of famous African American entrepreneurs. Madam C.J. Walker, the first African American woman to become a millionaire, did not gain her nationwide success and popularity until around 1915. Crucially, Scott Joplin saw the potential of a strong African American woman and chose to share his vision of her through *Treemonisha*. The African American heroine Treemonisha was created to give all

[130] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Vol. Rev. 10th anniversary ed. Perspectives on Gender (New York: Routledge, 2000), 4.

[131] Jacqueline Bobo, Cynthia Hudley, and Claudine Michel, *The Black Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2004), 415.

[132] Joplin, 2.

African Americans pride in what could become of their race in the future. That African Americans have been brainwashed into feeling inferior to white Americans is evident in the 1980 doll study where black and white children were given a white doll and a black doll and asked to choose which one likely lived in slums. Most of the children, both black and white, chose the black doll simply based on their perception of African American people.[133]

Because of perceptions like this one, African Americans felt, and some still feel, the need to adapt to white culture to give themselves a feeling of worth. By adapting to white culture, African Americans might possibly have the chance of being considered more of a human, given more opportunities, and treated less like property.[134] This may even have been true for Scott Joplin himself. In Earl Stewart and Jan Duran's article, they speak about the importance of *Treemonisha* on Joplin's career. They note, for example, "[*Treemonisha*], Scott Joplin's only surviving opera, was without question his most prodigious compositional achievement."[135] While there is an argument for the truth to this statement, one can only question the motives behind the statement. Is the opera considered "prodigious" because of its size and quality, or it is because it is an opera, a predominately white music genre?

Because African Americans have been deemed inferior since their arrival in the United States by white Americans, some African Americans have felt they will more than likely get respect from white Americans if they adapt to white culture. Even Treemonisha attempts change the view of her community and shows them how to adapt to white culture once members elect

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[133] Reginald L. Jones and Yvonne Smith, "Black Children's Associations of Class Descriptive Labels," *Journal of Black Studies* 10, no. 3 (1980), 349.

[134] Bobo, 415.

[135] Earl Stewart and Jane Duran, "Scott Joplin and the Quest for Identity," *Journal Aesthetic Education* 41, no. 2 (2007), 95.

her as their leader by teaching the dance associated with the number, "A Real Slow Drag." The dance imitates the dignified dances done by white people in the late 1800s, and it seems as though Treemonisha has subconsciously decided that since her community is agreeing to be more like white people in their turn from superstition and ignorance, they are now ready to learn this dance, which is associated with white culture. Treemonisha gives many instructions on how to do the dance so that it stays dignified and no one gets out of order. It is unfortunate that, for some, being well-spoken and well-educated is considered adapting to white culture. Treemonisha is a true demonstration that education is for all Americans, not just white Americans, and it is a shame that being well-educated is considered adapting to white American culture. The message Treemonisha embodies is that education should be for all humans, and not exclusively for white Americans. Treemonisha had the mental capacity and discipline to gain knowledge and learn, and she believes that all humans do as well.

Forcing of African Americans to adapt to white American culture has been practiced since slaves were brought to America from Africa. White Americans felt it was the duty of white Christians to save Africans from superstitious ignorance, and other kinds of practices in their culture that were viewed as savage.[136] Because of the African diaspora, some African Americans may feel a sense of shame after being forced to abandon their African roots and culture, as being considered "well-educated" by white American standards moves African Americans further and further from their African culture and heritage. The question then becomes, how much does an African American surrender in the efforts to be considered truly American? Over time, some African Americans have striven to be accepted by white Americans, so they want little to do with their African or African American culture.

[136] Bobo, 415.

Unfortunately, this has caused a divide between the educated and the uneducated within the African American community. In the 1960s and 70s, educated African Americans with better jobs began moving to the suburbs, where most of white America lived, while poorer blacks remained in poor housing in the inner city.[137] Educated African Americans ultimately became closer to white Americans than to the uneducated, poorer members of their own race. *Treemonisha* shows the very early stages of educated and enlightened African Americans being further removed from their own culture while attempting to embrace white American culture, and how those who wish to keep their African traditions and practices alive are ridiculed by other African Americans, just as the conjurers were ridiculed by their community.

The story of *Treemonisha* is an extraordinary one of a community's triumph into enlightenment. No more "evil for evil" because the community will not progress. Scott Joplin shows the goodness in African Americans and expresses the positive facet of enlightenment through Treemonisha when she warns, "Ignorance is criminal in this enlightened day. So, let us all get busy, when once we have found the way."[138] *Treemonisha* is credited with being the first American opera written and set in America and consequently Scott Joplin is, as TJ Anderson says in Chapter 7, the father of American opera. It is possible that *Treemonisha's* lack of drama and weak libretto, as expressed by critics discussed in Chapter 8, is the reason the opera is overlooked in opera companies and classrooms. Education and deliverance are not considered dramatic enough subjects for a large stage, so some stage directors of *Treemonisha* productions have resorted to creating a love story between Treemonisha and Remus, like the love story found in *Porgy and Bess*, when Joplin's libretto suggests nothing of the sort. Creating a love story

[137] Diane Nilsen Westcott, "Blacks in the 1970' S: Did They Scale the Job Ladder?" *Monthly Labor Review* 105, no. 6 (1982), 33-4.

[138] Joplin, 205.

takes away from the strength of the true story in the opera. Americans want the dramatic intensity of Italian operas by composers such as Verdi and Puccini, but it is important to keep in mind the nature of the story, the message to be received from the story, and the time period in which it was set and composed.

After the research conducted on *Treemonisha*, there are still a few lingering, unanswered questions about Joplin and *Treemonisha*'s place in the operatic canon. One might wonder, even though Joplin was an accomplished Ragtime composer of great talent, did Scott Joplin only become a serious composer by the standards of white America once it was discovered that he had composed an opera? It seems as though some musicologists, white and black, who finally discovered Joplin's music around the mid-20th century, only began to consider Scott Joplin an extraordinary composer once they realized, he ceased composing Ragtime and began composing opera.

The Atlanta premiere of *Treemonisha* had wonderfully positive responses from the audience and critics, so if the premiere was such a success, why has this opera has been performed so little? At the time of this document, I have performed *Porgy and Bess* three times, but I have not performed or seen *Treemonisha* live once. This is evidence that *Porgy and Bess* is more well-known and performed more often than *Treemonisha*. Why is this? It could be possible that *Treemonisha* has been discriminated against because Joplin is viewed as mainly a composer of Ragtime and not of opera, but Gershwin was mainly a composer of Jazz and Musical Theater, so the theory of being discriminated against for composing outside of their main genre could be plausible if Gershwin's opera was equally discriminated against. Why has *Porgy and Bess* been favored more than *Treemonisha*, and what can be done to promote

Treemonisha so that it is relevant today and can take a more prominent place in the canon of American opera?

Ignoring *Treemonisha* creates a significant deficit in the teaching of American opera in academia. Most lectures on American operatic composers will begin and end with George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* and not even mention *Treemonisha*. There are many elements to explore in this opera such as Joplin's fusion of opposing musical genres like Ragtime rhythmic elements and opera, similar to the fusion of Spanish dance rhythms and opera found in Georges Bizet's *Carmen*. *Treemonisha* and Scott Joplin should be given the acknowledgment they both deserve on the stage and in the classroom.

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